them Study Guide

them by Joyce Carol Oates

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Contents

Introduction

them is a story about urban life in America, centered on the experiences of a mother, Loretta, and her children Jules and Maureen. In the "Author's Note" at the beginning of the book, Joyce Carol Oates explains that she based one of the characters, Maureen Wendall, on a young woman who had been her student at the University of Detroit, and indeed chapters eight and nine of the middle part of the book consist of letters written by Maureen to a former instructor whom she addresses "Dear Miss Oates." Whatever the source that inspired the events in this book, it is highly unlikely that all of the events in the Wendall family's life between 1937 and 1967 could be drawn from any one person's experiences. This presentation of the story as "history in fiction form" does, however, help readers believe that all of the details that are rendered in graphic brutality are true to what life in the poorest of urban areas must have been like.

them is actually the final installment of a trilogy about life in various settings within American society. The first novel, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), follows forty years in the life of a farm family. The second, *Expensive People* (1967), examines the world of suburbia and the values that are held and lost there. The urban world depicted in *them* is so vicious to love and prone to random violence that in there is no peace to be found by its protagonists, Maureen and Jules Wendall, the siblings who have been hardened by city life: they leave to pursue empty dreams in California and suburban Detroit.

Author Biography

Joyce Carol Oates is widely recognized as one of America's most active writers, having published dozens of novels, poetry collections, short story collections, dramas, and essays. She was born in 1938, the same year as Jules Wendall of *them,* and she grew up in the rural countryside on the outskirts of Lockport, New York, attending a one-room school during her primary education. After receiving a typewriter at age fourteen, she wrote "novel after novel" throughout high school and college. Oates attended Syracuse University on a scholarship, graduating as class valedictorian in 1960, and the following year she earned a Master of Arts degree from the University of Wisconsin. From 1961 to 1967 she lived in Detroit and taught at the University of Detroit, a time that she cites as an inspiration, not just for *them,* but for the rest of her writing career: "Detroit, my 'great' subject," she wrote in the essay "Visions of Detroit," "made me the person I am, consequently the writer I am□for better or worse." *them,* her third published novel, won Oates a National Book Award at the age of thirty-two.

From 1967 to 1978 Oates taught at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, just across the river from Detroit, and during that time, while handling a full teaching course load, she managed to produce an average of two to three novels per year. In 1978 she began her long-standing affiliation with Princeton University, first as a Writer-in-Residence from 1978 to 1981 and then as a professor, from 1987 to the present. Oates and her husband, Raymond Smith, edit the acclaimed journal *The Ontario Review.* Throughout her career her writing style has taken several turns, from the urban realism of her early novels to a more imaginary worldview to the history ad romanticism of her Gothic novels (such as *Bellefleur, Bloodsmore Romance and Mysteries of Winterthurn)* of the mid-1980s. In recent years Oates has diversified even further into different genres, producing several books of poetry and essays, and a few of her plays have been produced to mixed reviews. Some of her latest works, a series of suspense novels, have been published under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith.

Plot Summary

Outline

The *them* of Oates's novel are Loretta Wendall, her daughter, Maureen, and her son, Jules, as well as the pressures of their culture, the targets of their hatred, and the multitude of characters that surround them. The novel is set in Detroit and its environs and spans the years 1937 to 1967□from Great Depression to racial unrest and riots. In between, the story is told through the layered perspectives of these three characters as it follows the intimate details of their lives.

The Thirties

In an urban slum, Loretta Botsford stands in front of a mirror admiring herself. Her father is an alcoholic casualty of the Depression, her mother is dead, and her brother, Brock□confused and alienated□has grown increasingly hostile. Despite this, Loretta is happy, and her appearance is one source of joy. She is gloriously generic□a Hollywood look that is shared by hundreds of other girls□and she feels a sense of security in their shared conformity. After arguing with Brock, Loretta goes out and meets Bernie Malin in the street. He comes back, they have sex, and she is awakened by a gunshot. Brock has killed Bernie, and Loretta runs out in terror. A policeman, Howard Wendall, brings her back to the apartment and then forces himself upon her.

Now married to Howard and pregnant with his (or Bernie's) child, Loretta is content even though she feels her life has ended. Her father is institutionalized, and Jules is born. Howard is accused of corruption, loses his job, and he and Loretta move with her mother and father-in-law to the countryside. A second baby, Maureen, is born, and Loretta feels increasingly lost without a city surrounding her.

The Forties

Howard goes off to war. Jules is a bright little boy who wanders around the area fearlessly until he's traumatized by the sight of a decapitated man in a plane crash. The narrative shifts to Jules's perspective, and describes his frustrations with the stultifying life of his family. He discovers the meaning of power while putting on a magic show for Maureen. Having lit and put down a match, he watches while the fire consumes a barn in a matter of moments. Meanwhile, Loretta grows more and more restless, and decides to take the children to Detroit. The first day there, she is arrested for streetwalking.

The Fifties

It's ten years later, Howard is in Detroit, he and Loretta have a new child, Betty, and Jules is in love with a nun. The novel jumps forward three years□Jules has lost his

virginity and Grandma Wendall has moved in with the family, who have moved to a new address. The narrative takes up Maureen's perspective. Maureen is a fastidious, quiet girl who spends her evenings at the library and harbors a violent hatred for the mess by which she's surrounded. Howard is crushed in a workplace accident, leaving the children almost unmoved. Loretta gets a job and a new husband, Pat Furlong, and Grandma Wendall is institutionalized. As the children grow, they diverge from the early potential they showed. Jules flunks out of high school, and Betty is often in trouble with the police. Maureen is still a "good girl" until she loses the Homeroom Secretary's minute book in a quasi-Fall from Grace. During her obsessive attempt to find it she becomes fixated on the money she needs to leave home and begins prostituting herself. Her grades drop.

Loretta is pregnant and out of work. Furlong finds money hidden in Maureen's room and beats her nearly to death when she comes home. Profoundly disassociated from her body, Maureen sits in a sort of waking coma for a year, growing fatter and fatter. The novel switches to Jules's perspective. Loretta and Furlong are getting divorced, Brock is in town, and Jules has a job as a driver for Bernard Geffen, a wealthy, gangster-like man who is later stabbed to death. Becoming a florist's delivery boy next, Jules is obsessed with Geffen's niece, Nadine, and pressures her to talk to him alone. Nadine□not a very stable girl□asks Jules to run away to Texas or Mexico with her. They steal a car from her parents' friend and take off. Jules is forced to mug and rob to support them, but his efforts fail when he collapses with severe diarrhea. When he recovers, he finds that Nadine has gone, taking the car with her.

Back in Detroit, the narrative is told from Maureen's disturbed but growing consciousness. A series of letters from Jules chart his downward trajectory, from bright hopes in Houston, to a job in Tulsa as an experimental subject that leaves him hospitalized and near blind. While Brock is helping Maureen to recover, the narrative is intercut with a letter from Maureen to Oates, written in 1966. The next ten years of Maureen's life are laid out in "future retrospective." Brock helps her to recover, she gets a job, leaves home, and attends the University of Detroit, where Oates is one of her teachers.

The Sixties

It's 1966. Jules is back in Detroit□driving for his Uncle Samson□and Brock is dying. In a restaurant with Samson he comes face to face with Nadine. They meet several days later. She's married, but says she still loves him. Jules and Nadine finally make love, but Nadine is still dangerously obsessed with the untouchability of her body. After convincing herself that her mind is sullied and that she's a whore, she shoots Jules.

In April, Maureen is in love with her married teacher, gazing into her mirror just as Loretta did in the novel's opening scene. She hates black people with a ferocity that paralyzes her. Jules, shot twice, is still alive, but has disappeared. The narrative takes up the teacher's perspective as he is drawn to Maureen's intensity and need. In May, televisions blare the noise of war protests in the background as Maureen tells her

mother that she's getting married. It's 1967, and Jules walks through Detroit observing the protests before meeting Mort, a man with a Ph.D. in sociology who's involved with various causes. Jules listens as the academic members of UUAP discuss possible black leaders to take over from President Johnson and the necessity of revolution.

In July, the temperature soars and Jules's relationship with another woman, Marcia, is strained by his involvement with a woman named Vera.

Jules is awakened by sirens. The riots have begun, and he is swept along with the mob. The revolutionaries of the UUAP are beaten by police. A policeman chases Jules, refusing to let him go, and with a weary sense of righteousness, Jules shoots him in the face. Loretta's building is burnt down and she is given temporary refuge in a middle-class home. Watching a television program about the riots, she sees Jules among the panel of UUAP members being interviewed. "Fire burns and does its duty," he says. In the final scene, Jules and Maureen say good-bye. She has a new life now, and he is going to the West Coast with the UUAP.

Children of Silence, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Children of Silence, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 Summary

Them is the story of Loretta Wendall and two of her children, Jules and Maureen, and their struggles with poverty and violence which negatively impact their lives causing a cycle of hatred and despair. The story takes place in Detroit, Michigan, from the years 1937 to 1967. As the novel begins, Loretta is a girl of 16 who lives with an unemployed, alcoholic father and anti-social older brother. Loretta's mother had been institutionalized for mental health issues and died several years ago. Loretta is a continual optimist despite her circumstances and feels the excitement of potential always around the next corner.

Loretta, with her long blonde hair and thin waist, is particularly pleased with her looks. Although she is not seeing any one boy in particular there are rumors about her spending time with the wrong kind of boys on the street. Loretta's brother, Brock, challenges Loretta on her behavior and the resulting bad reputation, especially about a certain boy named Bernie Malin, but Loretta is determined to see whom she wants.

On the way to a girlfriend's house one Saturday night, Loretta encounters Bernie and some of his friends on the street and Bernie convinces Loretta to go to a party with him. Eventually Loretta and Bernie return to Loretta's bedroom and have sex. At dawn the next morning, Loretta is jolted from sleep by a gunshot and through a haze realizes that Bernie is dead and that it must have been Brock who shot him. Loretta quickly dresses and runs to her friend Rita's house for help. Rita gives her what money she has and Loretta is determined to buy a gun to protect herself from any more violence in her life.

Leaving Rita's house, Loretta encounters a policeman, Howard Wendall, who accompanies Loretta back to the house to determine the nature of the crime. Harold forces himself on Loretta sexually in return for covering up the murder. Loretta feels nothing other than the fact that her youth is over. Now pregnant with Howard's, or possibly Bernie's, child, Loretta marries Howard and the couple moves to an apartment not far from Howard's mother, Mrs. Wendall. Howard is employed as a police officer and Loretta settles into the life of a young housewife and makes friends with other young wives in the neighborhood.

Loretta has minimal contact with her family, especially her father who was always out drinking or sleeping off his drunkenness somewhere. One day Loretta returns to her father's house for a visit and finds that her father has been institutionalized and no one had even bothered to inform her. Apparently, Loretta's father had created some trouble during a drunken brawl and sent away for observation. Loretta surmises that Howard, being on the police force, must have known about this but never told her. Howard is

glad to be rid of his drunken father-in-law and the rift between Loretta and her husband begins.

Loretta gives birth to a baby boy whom she names Jules. Mrs. Wendall is particularly fond of Jules and visits the house frequently bringing clothes and gifts for the new baby. The happy news of the household does not last as Howard is fired from his job for corrupt behavior. Mrs. Wendall is especially mortified at this disgrace and the entire family moves from Detroit to the home of a relative in the country.

Howard takes a menial job and Loretta struggles to live with her in-laws, especially the overbearing Mrs. Wendall. Loretta's only joy is the delightful Jules, who grows into a curious boy who runs away all the time just for the sake of adventure. Loretta gives birth to her second child, Maureen, and her hatred of her life and her domineering mother-in-law continues.

Children of Silence, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 Analysis

The author immediately introduces the themes of violence and poverty in this section. Loretta's family has been impacted because her father has not been able to find work after the Great Depression. The unemployment leads to alcoholism and abuse and the cycle of despair continually infiltrates the household. Loretta's mother suffers a nervous breakdown and eventually dies while Brock, Loretta's brother, seethes with inner rage and ultimately shoots Loretta's boyfriend, which alters the paths of the family.

In spite of the dire circumstances of her life, Loretta is able to find some positive aspects and hopes that life holds more potential. Unfortunately poverty limits Loretta's options and she begins another depressing phase of her life surrounded by people who cannot provide her with any hope because they have none to share. Ironically it is the move to the wide-open spaces of the country, which suffocates Loretta, who feels trapped in a house with an unresponsive husband and a vindictive mother-in-law. Loretta clings to her children as the only spark of hope at this point in a flat and lifeless existence.

Children of Silence, Chapters 6, 7 and 8

Children of Silence, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Summary

Howard leaves the farm to fight in World War II, which leaves Loretta and her children at the mercy of the domineering Mrs. Wendall. Amazingly, Loretta does not really miss Howard who has become sullen and unresponsive and not much of a husband. Loretta has a third child, a girl she names Betty, making Loretta a young woman burdened with the cares of raising children alone even though she is married.

Loretta's real concerns are her children, especially Jules, who is prone to running away without regard for anyone's concern for him. One night in particular, Loretta is frantic to find Jules and ultimately discovers him in an almost catatonic state, having witnessed the dead bodies in a local plane crash. Jules also discovers the power of fire during this time and burns down a barn as the result of a magic act for Maureen. Mrs. Wendall whips Jules with a stick for the vandalism and tells him that one day Jules will end up in the electric chair and she will pull the switch.

One day, Loretta reaches a point of no return in this abusive household and suddenly takes the bus back to Detroit with her three children. Hoping that her old friend, Rita, may be able to help her, Loretta heads to her house, but Rita's husband is gruff and will not welcome any intrusion. Having rented a room over a funeral parlor, Loretta leaves the two girls in Jules' care and heads out to the street, where she is arrested for prostitution. Eventually, Loretta establishes a life for her and the kids in Detroit where Jules, Maureen and Betty are enrolled in Catholic school and Jules falls in love with one of the nuns.

Children of Silence, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Analysis

The cycle of violence and poverty continues as Loretta's children become the latest little victims. The anger and loss of hope the adults experience filters down through violence and abuse to the children. Jules continually runs away as his only means of escape and his survival instincts are very strong. Jules also has to grow up very fast because he is the oldest and forced to care for his sisters when Loretta cannot, but he can always look at his maps and books and dream of getting far away from Detroit one day.

Children of Silence, Chapters 9 and 10

Children of Silence, Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

It is now 1953 and Mrs. Wendall has come to Detroit to live with Loretta and Howard. The old woman is still evil-spirited, yet Jules is kind to her and takes her on the bus to the clinic where they wait for hours for medical attention. Jules is the only one who is concerned that the old woman is terminally ill. The lack of money is pervasive and Jules is almost killed one night on the streets as he ponders the possibility of robbing a store and is shot at by a police officer. Jules eventually makes it home and goes to school the next day where he collapses into an exhausted sleep.

The family moves from one slum neighborhood to another, at the time that Maureen is thirteen and the story switches from Jules' perspective to Maureen's. Maureen tries to rise above the life of poverty and neglect and hates her parents for keeping the family mired in the desolate situation. Maureen is responsible for much of the housework and cooking for the family, in addition to her own schoolwork. Maureen's method of escape is visiting the library every day, which is a haven with its solid architecture and the worlds available through the pages of all the books at her disposal.

The youngest child in the family, Betty, is a child of the streets at a very early age and she does not connect with the others or engage in any relationship building with her brother or sister. Howard is killed in an accident at work where he is crushed by some falling steel. The children react with little emotion and Jules just wants the whole situation to be over, as if it is just one more bad day to be endured.

Children of Silence, Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Although there is no way out of the desperate lives for Jules and Maureen, they have amazing powers of resilience and hopefulness. Both of them comment independently at different points that with each new day something new could happen; that each day has some potential. Betty falls into the mainstream flow of poverty in the slums of Detroit and ridicules Jules and Maureen for their trying to break out of the dismal situation.

Jules and Maureen are also very compassionate people, Jules in particular toward his grandmother who physically and verbally abused him in the past. To Jules, every day is an adventure and each person is just an element of that adventure which he accepts.

There is a strong core of detachment and survival in them though, and even their father's death is met with an almost casual indifference.

The author introduces beautiful imagery and language techniques, which can be quite startling amidst the despair of the characters' lives. When describing the perfection of the library for Maureen, the author uses the simile of the silence being like a beautiful glass vase, which could be shattered at any moment. The library is Maureen's haven

but she knows that any good thing can be violently taken from her at any time and this visual imagery brings that point to the reader subtly but with much impact.

Children of Silence, Chapters 11, 12 and 13

Children of Silence, Chapters 11, 12 and 13 Summary

After Howard's funeral, Jules struggles to remember anything about his father and knows instinctively that he does not want to suffer the same fate of anonymity with his own children someday. Jules does not have the luxury of time to devote to melancholy and focuses now on earning money to escape his life.

Loretta is forced to get a job and starts dating a man named Pat Furlong whom she soon marries. Mrs. Wendall is still an abusive force in the household and alienates herself from all those upon whom she is forced to rely. Maureen is a conscientious young girl and takes on many responsibilities in the house while maintaining her schoolwork and her visits to the library. Maureen is elected secretary for her homeroom, a position particularly suited to her skills, but one day Maureen loses the notebook containing the history of years of notes and she is devastated by her clumsiness and apparent lack of responsibility.

Grandma Wendall's health situation forces the family to move the old woman to a nursing home, which alleviates some of the burden and stress in the household. Loretta takes this opportunity to move the family to an apartment where she is free of the responsibilities of running a house.

Children of Silence, Chapters 11, 12 and 13 Analysis

One of the overriding elements of a life of poverty is the inability to attach to anything given the always-imminent fact that everything can be taken away at any time. The children learn this early and have lived in many households with no particular trauma related to new residences. It is particularly apparent in the personal relationships of the children who neither love nor hate their parents. They all just exist. Surviving does not leave much time for personal bonding, especially when the adults themselves are victims of their own circumstances and do not have anything to pass on to their children. Howard's death is perceived as just one more issue to be managed in the chaotic household.

Children of Silence, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17

Children of Silence, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 Summary

Maureen's innocence begins to erode as Loretta forces her to give back rubs to Pat, Maureen's new stepfather. Maureen is also forced to cook and wait up for Pat who comes home drunk every night while Loretta goes to bed. Going to the library is still Maureen's only method of escape and she associates the quiet stillness with a life she hopes to have one day away from the family.

One night, it occurs to Maureen that she must get money immediately so she can leave. Loretta and Pat have prohibited her from getting a job because it will take Maureen away from running the household, so Maureen turns to prostitution. Maureen meets the same men several times a week and hides the cash she receives in books in her room because she knows no one in the family will ever find it there. Maureen is able to distance herself from the physical act of prostitution and focuses only on the money she is accumulating.

One day, Pat sees Maureen in a car with a man and Pat beats Maureen practically to death when she returns home that night

Children of Silence, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 Analysis

Jules and Maureen have reached the end of their innocence and are forced out onto the streets to find a way to survive and hopefully escape. All their positive efforts in school are dashed as the realities of the world crash down on them. Jules is at least able to escape to the streets because of his being male but Maureen is trapped in the house almost like a slave, with no hope of generating income to better her life. It is almost unfathomable that situations like this exist where parents cannot permit the growth and improvement of their own children in favor of their own needs. The lengths to which Maureen goes by prostituting herself are destructive, not only to her self esteem, but to her very life when she is nearly beaten to death by her stepfather.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 1, 2 and 3

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

Loretta is pregnant again and unemployed and Pat is spending four months in jail for the vicious attack on Maureen. Jules is now eighteen and visits Maureen who is in a catatonic state since the attack. Loretta is in complete denial over Maureen's condition and continually feeds Maureen sweets thinking that if her daughter eats, she must be fine. Jules loves his mother and sister but cannot visit often because the continuing devastation to their lives is almost more than he can bear and he is powerless to stop it.

Jules bumps into a woman named Faye on the street one day and she takes him home because he is lightheaded from lack of food and sleep. Jules becomes intimately involved with Faye who is being kept by a married man named Bernard Geffen. Bernard hires Jules to drive him around and act as an assistant. Jules is intrigued with Bernard's freewheeling lifestyle and generosity after Bernard gives Jules a check for one hundred dollars for a haircut and a suit and soon after, gives Jules another check for two hundred dollars to buy groceries for Loretta.

Jules waits on the transaction at the back with much anxiety because he feels that the whole situation cannot be for real. He fears that so much money will not really materialize. The checks are valid though, and Jules gets the money. Later that day, Bernard writes Jules another check, this time for ten thousand dollars, so that Jules can buy him a new Cadillac. One day, Jules drives Bernard to a house in Grosse Pointe where Jules sees a beautiful girl named Nadine, whom he learns is Bernard's niece. Nadine is obviously in a different social class from Jules, but he cannot get Nadine out of his head and vows to connect with her someday.

Soon after Jules drops Bernard at an appointment in Detroit and becomes concerned when Bernard is gone for an inordinately long period of time. Jules enters the old building and finds Bernard lying face up on the floor with his throat slashed. Jules returns the ten thousand dollars in cash, which had been designated for the new Cadillac, to Bernard's pocket and leaves the room.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

Jules thinks his luck has changed with the chance encounter with Faye and ultimately Bernard Geffen. The money that Bernard bestows on Jules seems too good to be true and Jules is afraid that his own appearance and unlikelihood of having checks for

substantial amounts of money cannot be perceived positively at the bank. Bernard's intentions are real and he even offers to fund Jules' college education but once more, Jules' hopes die, this time with the murder of Bernard. Jules is a romantic at heart and sees potential in each encounter and, in spite of his crude upbringing, holds out hope that he will be able to plan his life one day instead of having circumstances thrust upon him.

The author wants the reader to understand the day-to-day existence lived by Jules and the family. Jules meets Faye and goes home with her in the hopes of getting a meal and becomes intimately involved, even though Faye is involved with Bernard. Comfort and satisfaction are taken in whatever form Jules can find them, although in his mind he would clearly prefer making different choices.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 4, 5 and 6

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary

It is now 1956 and Jules is employed as a delivery boy for a florist after Bernard's murder. Jules learns that Bernard had been involved in the mob in Detroit and his killing had been related to underworld crime. This fact has escaped Nadine, Bernard's niece, whom Jules obsesses over. Jules uses the pretense of delivering flowers to Nadine one day and seduces Nadine who is an emotionally unstable girl.

Jules and Nadine swear their love for each other and Jules steals a car to drive them to Mexico, or Texas, because Nadine has a burning desire to leave. Staying in rundown hotels on the road, Jules is forced to steal in order to provide for Nadine. For some unknown reason, perhaps the water, Jules is struck with dysentery and Nadine leaves him in a hotel room and takes the car, trying to make her way back to Michigan.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

Jules' life seems to be a string of pointless encounters with people who end up taking more from him than they provide in return. In his attempt to better his situation, Jules pursues the elusive Nadine, who uses Jules for his ability to whisk her away from her unhappy home life. The author uses irony to show that Jules moves further away from security with each attempt to achieve it, as recently evidenced by Bernard and now Nadine. Bernard's intentions had been true, but Nadine is a self-absorbed rich girl using Jules for some thrills, never realizing the impact she has on his psyche.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapter 7

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapter 7 Summary

The story transitions into Maureen's recovery in this section as she slowly evolves from the catatonic state, which has imprisoned her for the last year. Maureen can begin to hear and understand the voices in the house and those sounds are interwoven with flashbacks of the night that Pat beat her. Loretta's brother, Brock, has come for a visit and talks to Maureen and spends much time with her, which helps her to reconnect with the family again.

In attempts to make his way back from Texas to Michigan, Jules takes a series of temporary jobs and sends word back to Loretta through a series of letters. The first letter comes from Houston, where Jules thinks he has a promising real estate career but that falls through and eventually, Jules finds himself in Tulsa as a participant in some medical experimental treatment, leaving Jules' eyesight severely impacted for the rest of his life.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapter 7 Analysis

The story has reached its climax for Maureen who has endured and come out on the other side of the darkness that imprisoned her. After her awakening it is as if Maureen has two sides to her personality and she can't distinguish between the old Maureen and the person she is now. This physical and emotional transformation is the turning point for Maureen, who will no longer be held captive by a mental state or by the circumstances of her life. Ironically it is Brock, Loretta's brother who killed Loretta's first boyfriend, who has the compassion and empathy to understand what Maureen needs. Brock himself has spent a life locked into circumstances beyond his control and his being able to project and help his niece bestows on him some redeeming qualities in an otherwise less than perfect life.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 8 and 9

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

Maureen writes to Miss Oates, a professor at the University of Detroit where Maureen attends night school. The year is now 1966 and many years have passed since Maureen's year of catatonia. The letters to the professor explain what the classes have meant to Maureen and how she has pieced her life back together after losing over a year to the semi-conscious state. The content of the letters vacillates from Maureen not being able to focus on the core of the message for her professor to being very specific about her future plans. Maureen has selected another one of her professors, a married man with children, and intends to break up the man's marriage and marry him herself, one day.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

In the notes at the beginning of the book, Oates mentions that Maureen's character is based on one of the author's students at the University of Detroit. It is very realistic when Oates crafts the letters from Maureen which are addressed to "Miss Oates" which increases the possibility that these letters may very well have been written and that Maureen is not loosely based, but actually a direct representation of a real student in Oates' class. Symbolically, Maureen writes the letters at the library, which has always been a haven for her and the quiet place where all her dreams take shape. Now, the library appears as a springboard for Maureen's new life and the letters are a cathartic symbol of the declaration and terms, which Maureen has now outlined.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 10, 11, 12 and 13

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 10, 11, 12 and 13 Summary

It is now July of 1966 and Jules is back in Detroit where he drives Loretta to the hospital every week to visit Brock, who is not improving from an unnamed illness. Jules is now employed by his father's brother, Samson Wendall, a businessman for whom he drives and functions as an assistant.

One day while at lunch with his Uncle Samson, Jules sees Nadine lunching with some friends at the same restaurant. Nadine provides Jules with her new contact information and asks him to call her. Jules waits two days but finally shows up at Nadine's house. Nadine is married now, but has never been able to forget Jules and he and Nadine get briefly reacquainted and agree to meet again.

Nearly two weeks later, Nadine calls Jules and they agree to meet at a hotel where they re-consummate their relationship. The experience is deeply moving for both Jules and Nadine; however, she vacillates between expressing a complete love for Jules and pulling away from him because of her inability to fully commit. As the couple walks on the sidewalk outside the hotel, making plans to meet again, Nadine is overcome with feelings of rage, pulls a gun from her pocket and shoots Jules.

To Whose Country Have I Come? Chapters 10, 11, 12 and 13 Analysis

Nadine's inability to love is the thing that draws Jules toward her for the challenge, but it is ultimately what drives Nadine to shoot Jules. Jules is so intent on having something beautiful in his life that he completely forgives Nadine for abandoning him in the hotel room in Texas, when he was desperately ill. Ironically his self-esteem seems to be challenged by allowing this type of behavior but Jules never has any problem approaching women and directly achieving his goals where they are concerned.

The author ends the section by saying that the spirit of the Lord had departed from Jules at this point and it is assumed that Jules has died from the gunshot wound; however, it is really the climax of the story from Jules' point of view, where he no longer tolerates injustice and begins to own his own life.

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

It is now April of 1966 and Maureen stares at her own image in a mirror just like her mother did at the beginning of the novel. Maureen has lost all the weight she gained during her year in the catatonic state. Maureen lives on her own now and is intent on luring her night school professor, Jim, away from his family so that she may marry him and have some security in her own life. Maureen is not sure she is capable of loving Jim, or any man, but is determined to do whatever she needs to in order to reach her goal of being taken care of.

The story shifts from Maureen's perspective to Jim's as he evaluates his life and his marriage to his wife for nine years. Jim had married and stayed married for the ordinary reasons but now the appearance of Maureen into his life has made him see what might be possible for a man like himself, who craves something new. Jim encourages Maureen's participation in after-class activities and openly pursues Maureen romantically.

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

The author uses the technique of switching narrative positions in the novel, which provides the situation's perspective from differing vantage points. The relationship between Maureen and Jim is one example of this technique. Maureen, calculatedly determines her path without any encumbrances, while Jim must weigh the impact of his actions on his immediate family and possibly his career. It is as if the "new" Maureen is driven and will not stop until she has achieved her goal. This position is so different from the passive Maureen as a younger girl, who was forced to accept verbal and physical abuse and for the first time, Maureen is in charge and nothing will stand in her way.

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 4 and 5

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

At the end of May, Maureen visits Loretta at the apartment where the TV broadcasts the images and sounds of the race riots in the streets of Detroit. The two women share contempt for the black people who they feel are at the core of all the city's problems. Maureen informs Loretta of her plans to marry Jim, a fact that pleases Loretta at first, especially since Jim is a college professor. When Loretta learns that Jim is a married man her tone changes and she calls Maureen a whore and kicks her out of the apartment.

At the same time, Jules walks the streets of Detroit observing the violence and the altercations on the streets and muses about his own existence. After the shooting, the doctors were able to save Jules, but he is not the same as before and feels as if he is a man inside a piece of rotten fruit. Jules feels hopeless for the first time in his life and may as well be invisible because no one takes any note of him anymore. It is as if the shooting had been a turning point and the old Jules was left on that sidewalk with Nadine on that fateful day.

Jules continues to amble through the chaotic city streets avoiding the gaze of the policemen out of habit. Suddenly a man grabs Jules by the arm and tries to convince Jules to come with him. This man named Mort has seen Jules on the street before and wants Jules to consider joining a socialist group.

Mort is full of hope for America in spite of the chaos and the imminent riots right here in Detroit. Mort wants to rid himself of his money in order to be free to concentrate on helping people, a concept that is completely foreign to Jules. As Mort and Jules talk, they are approached by a young woman named Vera who is one of Mort's protygys. The discussion turns to the possibility of Negro leaders, who could take over the country and even replace President Lyndon Johnson.

The idea of revolution is very real for Mort and his group, which thinks that Detroit is as good a place as any to initiate social change. Emotions run high and the group talks about the necessity for a huge display. Vera thinks of the idea of a fire and offers up her thousands of dollars worth of books and even her parents' home in Grosse Pointe. Mort tries to subdue such radical thoughts preferring social change on a more modest scale. Vera leaves the group and Jules follows, intrigued by something or someone for the first time in a long time. Vera is anxious to get home and tells Jules that she feels she has been in the depths of despair too long, with people like him and *them*, meaning the black people who run past them in both directions on the street. Jules and Vera find a

quiet place and have sex and Jules tells her that he once thought it impossible to live without love but now knows that it is possible and you just keep on living.

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

The theme of racial tension, which has been mentioned periodically during the novel, surfaces prominently in this section. This time period leading up to the racial riots in Detroit are filled with chaos, fear and damage. The author symbolically places Jules in contact with Mort, who lobbies for peaceful change, which reflects Jules' true nature although Jules is attracted to Vera's passionate nature and initiates a relationship with her.

The symbolism of fire is once again mentioned in relation to Jules. Earlier in the story Jules burns down a barn by accident, symbolizing his wish for the destruction of the abusive family environment. In this situation Vera suggests burning her parents' Grosse Pointe home, an icon for wealth and oppression. The author makes a reference to the book's title when the character Vera wants to leave the chaos of the Detroit streets, telling Jules that she has been lost with Jules and with *them,* meaning the rioters on the streets. Vera represents wealth and privilege as evidenced by her Grosse Pointe home and her involvement in the riots is more like a sporting event than any calling for social reform on her part. *them* are the nameless and faceless displaced people made even more anonymous by being grouped by a pronoun.

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 6 and 7

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

Jules has been living with a woman named Marcia and her little boy, Tommy. Marcia is weary of Jules' angst and his not wanting to commit to a relationship with her. Marcia would like to move away from Detroit and live a more peaceful life, but Jules is still drawn to life on the streets of the city. One day Jules can take Marcia's pleading no longer and walks out for good, saying that he will be back later.

Jules has been very aimless since his recovery from the gunshot wounds inflicted by Nadine. Not bothering to find work, Jules lives off the little bit of money that Marcia can provide and has put Vera on the streets to work as a hooker. Vera wants a more personal relationship with Jules but Jules is hollow inside and has nothing to give to anyone anymore on a personal level.

The day that Jules leaves Marcia is the day that the Detroit riots begin in full force. Jules walks among the chaos and terror on the streets and seems oblivious to the death and destruction around him. The fires that have been started by looters are almost hypnotic for Jules who can only muse that everyone's lungs are going to be filled with soot. Suddenly a young Negro boy runs up to Jules and shoves a rifle into his hands. It was not until the boy clutched at Jules' body and begins to fall that he realizes that the child has been shot in the back. Jules escapes the scene amid calls of help and realizes that he still clutches the rifle. Some kids from Kentucky drive by and offer Jules a ride and he hops into the car, happy to be off the sidewalks for a while.

The car is struck by something heavy thrown at it and Jules thinks they are being shot at too. Suddenly the car lunges toward soldiers sent out for protection, but swerves, sending all the passengers lunging forward. The driver keeps the car moving, past burning buildings, and around bodies lying in the street as if in some macabre pinball game. The car finally crashes into a building and comes to a stop.

Jules is energized by the wild ride and jumps out of the car with the rifle and heads down the street. Jules breaks the windows of a florist shop and encounters a policeman who had shot at him. Jules preys on the man, who pleads for his life and eventually knocks the policeman to the floor, points the rifle in the man's face, and pulls the trigger.

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

The author places her fictional characters amidst historical accuracies, which create a perception of realism and accuracy for the characters' experiences. The most intense example of this is when Jules is immersed in the racially motivated riots that overtook Detroit in 1967. The overcrowded, slum conditions and unemployment in urban areas, especially for black people in America at this time, incited race riots in many large cities across the country similar to the ones that occurred in Detroit.

Jules has no direction in his life, having lost all contact with his dysfunctional family and not able to make any lasting connections with the women in his life. This untethered existence makes Jules a prime candidate to get caught up in the surge of the riots. All the hate, neglect and abuse which have built up over the years, finally erupt in Jules who, having nothing more to lose shoots the police officer in the face.

The author continues to interject beautiful metaphors and similes into the violent drama as she does when Jules thinks of his life and his ability to persevere in spite of everything, calling himself one of the weeds that "grew to a height of three or four feet right through the sidewalk's cracks, struggling upward but without cruelty or design, mindless and content." Jules' transition to murder is staged against a backdrop of raging fires, which have been symbolic for all the major turning points in Jules' life.

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 8 and 9

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

Loretta is also on the streets during the riots that day and has gone out to steal a television. After carrying the television home, Loretta realizes that the set does not work and stares at the shiny sticker touting a guarantee. Loretta's building catches fire that night when a firebomb is thrown inside. Everything Loretta owned burns up, including the new stolen television set. Loretta joins the throngs of people seeking shelter in a local YMCA where she engages in conversation with several of the other victims stranded here. As the traumatized people wonder and worry about their children, it occurs to Loretta that she does not know the location of any of her own, including Randolph, the boy she had with Pat Furlong.

Loretta thinks about her children as babies and how sweet they had been and now she does not even know them. Loretta muses that maybe she did not have the right children, perhaps someone else's and that is the reason for the disconnect. Losing her children to the streets makes Loretta feel very alone but she rationalizes that in the end, each human being is ultimately alone, so there is nothing that can be done. Loretta cannot help but notice the air of dignity among some of these people, who are able to maintain in even the most desperate circumstances and she decides to adopt a policy of nobility to the best of her ability, offering to help those in the shelter tonight and considers the possibility of becoming a nurse. Loretta is offered shelter in a private home with four other riot victims and interacts with others as if she is an invited guest talking about her life and her children and the imminent state of becoming a grandmother.

One night, at the house, while everyone watches the news, Jules is interviewed on camera for his new position as an activist with the newly established United Action Against Poverty Program in Detroit. Loretta is mortified that Jules is not better dressed and her heart beats wildly as she listens to the panic in her son's voice. Jules informs the TV reporter about the necessity of the fires and the people in the streets, not so that a civilization can be rebuilt, but rather because fire burns and does its duty perpetually. To Jules, violence is not a singular event, but rather something to be endured on a regular basis.

Loretta recalls the day that Jules burned down the barn when he was just a small boy and Jules' fascination with the flames that erupted from the plane crash Jules witnessed at about the same time. The realization that Jules is a murderer floods over Loretta who is escorted, crying, out of the room where the others continue watching the news program.

A few weeks later Jules unexpectedly visits Maureen at her home in Dearborn. Maureen is now pregnant and married to Joe and thinks she has seen the last of her family, until the day when Jules arrives. Clearly uncomfortable, Maureen does not offer much information about her own life and tries to get Jules to leave quickly so that Joe does not come home to find Jules there.

Jules encourages Maureen to contact Loretta, or at least send some money, but Maureen contends that she and Joe are struggling financially and that is impossible. Jules informs Maureen that he is moving to Los Angeles to continue work with Mort and the United Action Against Poverty Program. Jules feels that his life is only beginning and is anxious to leave the defeated streets of Detroit for something fresh.

Maureen acknowledges her appreciation for Jules' care and concern over the years but she wants that part of her life to be over. Maureen has transitioned into a new life and wants no memories of the past and certainly no new encounters with anyone in her family or any of the rest of *them.* Jules reminds Maureen that she herself is one of *them* but she does not answer. Jules makes some affectionate gestures toward Maureen who does not respond and merely watches her brother retreat from her home and loves him for leaving.

Come My Soul, That Hath Long Languished, Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

The futility of Loretta's life comes flooding in on her when she sees Jules on TV and realizes that he is a murderer. The cycle of violence and despair has continued, despite Loretta's hopefulness as a young girl. When Loretta cries, it is as much for herself as it is for Jules, at the awful twist of fate which sent her life in the direction it did.

The author wants the reader to understand the full impact of poverty by using Loretta, Jules, and Maureen, and their struggles to rise above it. Loretta makes brave attempts to better her life through the years but never quite makes it and consequently, her children slide down the depths of the economic and social scale. Loretta seems to be punished for each attempt at bettering her life, as in the example of leaving the country and taking her kids to Detroit, where Loretta is arrested for prostitution on her first night back in the city.

Jules has sporadic success with money and Maureen has made a brave attempt at security by marrying Joe, although they are financially strapped. Sometimes the illusion of security is all that a person needs to keep going and Jude and Maureen always had that hope. It is the same positive outlook that Loretta had as a young girl, until Brock killed Bernie Malin, and her whole life changed with a gunshot.

At the end of the story, Jules seems to be in a more positive place and more hopeful than he has been for many years, as he plans to move to Los Angeles. Maureen is perplexed by Jules' final visit and admits to herself that she loves her brother, but she

loves him even more for leaving, forever. Hopefully Maureen has transcended the life of poverty and despair and any reminders of it are toxic and must be removed.

When Maureen berates Loretta, Brock, the other kids and all the neighbors, Jules reminds Maureen that she is also one of *them,* giving significance to the book's title. The author capsulizes the doomed futures of the poor in America by minimizing them and diminishing them to a simple pronoun, *them.* It is as if they do not deserve a real name and must stay lumped together, en masse, with a generic title, which seems to be harmless but inflicts real damage in its ambiguity.

Although the story of Loretta and her children is profoundly sad, the author also wants to point out the indomitable will of the human spirit to survive. Each of the characters finds coping mechanisms and methods for escape, which are fueled by an innate sense of hopefulness. Loretta despairs at the dire futures she has given her children, but perhaps her own sense of hope has passed along as the best and only gift she could provide *them.*

Characters

Brock Botsford

Brock Botsford is Loretta's brother. In the book's early chapters, he is a teenager with a gun, looking for some trouble; when Loretta brings Bernie Malin home to spend the night in her room, Brock comes in during the night and shoots him dead. He shows up in Detroit years later, staying with Loretta and Maureen after Furlong has gone away. Maureen credits his attention with bringing her out of her catatonic state. Brock enters a hospital with a mysterious degenerative disease, but he does not die: one day he gets dressed and walks out of the hospital, never to be heard from again.

Pat Furlong

Pat Furlong is Loretta's second husband. He does not work, owing to a back injury, but spends his days drinking in bars. After a while, Loretta becomes tired of him and has Maureen cook for him when he comes home late at night. Furlong's attempts to be a responsible father are limited to accusing Maureen of being involved in bad activities. When he finds out that Maureen has been acting as a prostitute, he beats her nearly to death, for which he receives a four-month jail sentence.

Randolph Furlong

The son that Loretta has with Pat Furlong, "Ran," does not appear in the novel after he is an infant. He is sometimes mentioned as being out in the streets.

Bernard Geffen

Bernard Geffen is Jules's eccentric, rich employer who hires him to be a driver and keeps giving him huge, unthinkable amounts of money first one hundred dollars then ten thousand dollars. Initially, Jules is suspicious because of Geffen's erratic behavior and the large quantities of money that he gives away, but he is comforted by the fact that the bank is willing to honor the checks. Several days after he starts working for him, Jules drives Geffen to a house and then, after waiting outside for a while, goes inside to find the house empty and Geffen dead, his throat slit with a butcher knife.

Nadine Greene

The niece of Bernard Geffen, Nadine Greene is the great love of Jules's life. Jules becomes infatuated with her one day when he is waiting for Bernard and she passes by the car; later, he goes to her house to see her, and they end up stealing her parents' car and running away for California. In a motel room in Texas, when he is sick in bed, she

leaves him. Years later he runs into her in Detroit: she is married to a wealthy man and living in an affluent suburb. She rents an apartment for the purpose of having trysts with Jules, but after their first night together, she shoots him and herself, though neither dies.

Bernie Malin

In the early chapters, when Loretta is a teenager living with her brother and alcoholic father, she takes Bernie as her first lover. However, Loretta's brother, Brock, shoots Bernie while he is in bed with Loretta.

Marcia

In June of 1967, before the race riots start, Jules lives with Marcia and her four-year-old son, Tommy.

Joyce Carol Oates

Having recovered from Furlong's beating and the psychological trauma that resulted from it, Maureen takes some classes at the local college. Several letters written from Maureen to Joyce Carol Oates, a former instructor, are printed within the book.

Mort Piercy

Mort Piercy is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Wayne State University and the head of the UUAP, which is an organization that he uses to take federal money and direct it toward violent radical causes. At the end of the novel, Jules leaves for California to work as Mort's assistant.

Vera

Vera is the young, mousy girl that Jules picks up at an activist meeting and of whom he sadistically takes advantage when he returns to street life after having been shot.

Betty Wendall

The younger sister of Maureen and Jules, Betty is seldom around the house, spending her time away from home with street toughs in Detroit. She is most prominent in the section in which Pat Furlong finds out about Maureen's activities in prostitution. She warns Maureen before she comes home, conveys the news of what happened to Loretta, and interacts with Maureen when she has locked herself away.

Howard Wendall

When Loretta finds herself with the dead body of Bernie Malin in her bed, she turns to Howard Wendall, a police officer. Howard helps Loretta dispose of Bernie's body, but in exchange she has sex with him, becomes pregnant, and marries him. Howard soon loses his police job by taking bribes, and moves the family to his parents' house in the country. When he returns from serving in World War II, Loretta has taken the children to Detroit to flee the Wendalls, but she has gotten arrested there. Howard joins the family in Detroit, but soon is killed in an industrial accident.

Jules Wendall

Jules is driven by his romantic passions, but he always fails at making his unrealistic dreams come true. The main thing he wants in life is Na-dine Greene, his one great love, with whom he is infatuated as soon as he sees her in the driveway of his parents' house. In the novel, he has two relationships with Nadine, one that ends in disappointment (she runs away from him when he is bedridden with the flu) and the other that ends in disaster (she shoots him, then herself).

There are other relationships with women in his life that resemble his relationship with Nadine. Soon after his father's funeral he begs Edith Kaminsky, a girl he hardly knows, for a picture of her, and when it blows away when he is crossing over an expressway, he chases it through traffic, romantically fixated on it. He lives with various women throughout the book, including Faye, who introduces him to Nadine's uncle, and Marcia, who accepts his philandering. He is courteous and protective of his sisters, his mother and his grandmother.

In addition to his relationships with women, though, Jules is defined by always being in trouble. Even when he is young, living in the country, he wanders away from his family at the site of a burning airplane wreck, and soon after sets the barn on fire. The business associations that he makes with Bernard Geffen, with his uncle Samson, and with Mort Piercy never seem entirely legitimate to him, even when they are. He has a troubled relationship with the police. When he is young, a policeman chases him when he is thinking about breaking into a building, and the cop, annoyed at being forced to run, puts his gun to Jules's head and pulls the trigger, but the chamber is empty. This scene is echoed in the novel's climactic scene where Jules, with nothing to lose and caught up in the heat of the riot, shoots a policeman dead.

Loretta Wendall

The novel opens with Loretta as a sixteen-year-old girl in 1937, living with her father and her brother, Brock. When her brother shoots Bernie, the boy with whom she has gone to bed, Loretta is forced to turn to the local policeman, Howard Wendall, for help. In return, he has sex with her, and when she becomes pregnant he marries her, although Loretta later raises some doubt about whether the baby, Jules, is his or Bernie's. After Howard

loses his job, she moves with him, his parents, and his sister, Connie, into a house in the country that is owned by a distant relative. Feeling trapped, she leaves while Howard is in the army, and moves to Detroit, where an old friend lives.

The day after arriving in Detroit Loretta tries to make money by prostitution, but is arrested by the first man she approaches. She is once again trapped when Howard helps her out of trouble. She has three children with Howard before he dies in an industrial accident, and then she marries Pat Furlong, with whom she has another child. After Furlong beats her daughter, Maureen, nearly to death, Loretta watches over her, optimistic that she will return to good health because "her appetite is good." Her children leave her as soon as they become old enough to survive on the streets by themselves, but they come back frequently to seek her approval, which she scarcely gives: when Maureen tells her that she is going to marry a married man, for instance, Loretta curses her and calls her a whore. After the riots have burned her apartment building and left her homeless, Loretta meets a man, Harold, in the temporary shelter at the YMCA, and a the end of the novel they are planning to get married.

Maureen Wendall

Maureen is the second child of Loretta and Howard Wendall. She tries to be a good girl, but all of the pressure of living in the city pulls her into a secret life of crime. One of the most significant moments in Maureen's younger life is when she is elected secretary of her homeroom and is made responsible for the blue notebook that has been used for years to keep the minutes of the class meetings. Sister Mary Paul stresses the importance of keeping the notebook clean and respectable, but one day after Maureen runs into Jules in the street and he gives her some money, she finds that she has lost the book.

Soon after losing the notebook, Maureen becomes obsessed with money, and starts secretly meeting with grown men, going to motels with them and having sex for money. She keeps her savings in a book in her room. When her mother's second husband sees her in a car with one of the men, he finds the money and then beats her mercilessly. For almost a year Maureen stays in her room, gaining weight, not responding to people who talk to her.

After Maureen regains her stability, she attends night school at the University of Detroit. She outlines her recovery and her plans for the future in several letters addressed to "Joyce Carol Oates," who was her teacher at the university. One of her plans is to marry a man who is her English teacher, even though he is married with three children and they have never even talked outside of class. The teacher does become infatuated with Maureen, and at the end of the novel, Maureen and he are married and living in an apartment in the suburbs. At this point, Maureen has also broken off contact with most members of her family.

Samson Wendall

Samson Wendall is Howard Wendall's rich and successful brother. Growing up, Jules and Maureen know little about their Uncle Samson except that he is wealthy. When Jules is twenty-seven, Samson hires him to be his driver and learn his tool-and-die business because he is disappointed in his own son, Joseph, who has left home to hitchhike around Europe.

Themes

Race and Racism

The characters in this novel are in a socioeconomic class that prohibits them from living in racially segregated areas, and the familiarity between the races boils over into contempt. Today, there are areas of all major cities that are associated with one race or another, but when *them* was published in 1969 separation of races was even more clearly enacted: the advancements in civil rights that allowed Blacks to legally enter all parts of society were just a few years old at the time, and their effects were hardly felt. As a lingering effect of racist housing and employment laws that had existed for almost a hundred years since the Civil War, the neighborhoods where black people lived were almost always poor neighborhoods.

In the novel, Jules Wendall often takes note of the black children playing in the streets where he lives, an indication that the Wendalls live in the poorer area of town. For most of the book black characters are mentioned infrequently, but more and more often they are referred to with anger and resentment, as examples of the kind of people that these characters look down on as they cling desperately to their self-respect. For example, Nadine, disgusted with herself for committing adultery, accuses Jules of thinking her "Like some little slut of yours. Some Negro woman." Later, Jules has to assure the woman that he is living with, Marcia, that the affair he is having is not with a black woman, when she asks, "She's white, at least? At least she's white?" Marcia later warns him that his radical friends are headed for trouble: "Don't they know that niggers don't give a damn about them? They don't trust them and can't understand their big words. A nigger is a nigger." She lives in a predominantly black neighborhood and presumably needs to belittle her neighbors to build up her own sense of self-worth. At the end of the book a riot ensues; the riot is fueled by the pent-up rage of oppressed Blacks, although readers see that it is the work of whites who purposely try to stir up trouble.

Wealth and Poverty

The three principle characters of *them* struggle against poverty in the story. Loretta fails to make any progress in her struggle, but she maintains a consistency that keeps her going. Maureen's success is mixed. Jules meets with unexpected financial success time and again. Even as a teenager, Loretta works hard as a laborer, caring for her alcoholic father and her wild brother and dreaming of the glamour of Saturday night. Later, when she tries to free herself of the burden of her husband's family, she takes her children and runs away to Detroit, where, in an attempt to make quick, easy money, she tries prostitution, but is arrested immediately. During the riots she steals a television, but it does not work well and then her apartment building burns down, convincing Loretta that she has been punished for her theft.

While in high school, Maureen becomes obsessed with making money, in order to protect herself from the instability of life with her mother and stepfather. Ironically, it is because her mother does not trust her to stay out of trouble, refusing to let her take a job and accusing her of bad behavior, that Maureen turns to prostitution for money. She is successful in the sense that men pay her well and that the police in her neighborhood are too apathetic to bother her, but she is victimized by her stepfather's rage. In the end she becomes a suburban housewife, kept in a secure but sterile environment.

Throughout the novel, Jules never has a problem obtaining money: he is, in fact, such a likable person that strange benefactors seek him out. He never understands Bernard Geffen's business while working for him, but he nervously cashes checks for huge amounts and sees the money magically placed in his hand; similarly, his Uncle Samson's business is not as important to Jules as the trappings that surround it. A large part of his fascination with Nadine Greene, and her fascination with him, may be seen as resulting from the beliefs that poor and rich people have about each other's moral purity. In the end, Jules is disillusioned and desensitized, making his money from handouts from the anarchist Mort Piercy and from Vera's prostitution: each gives freely to him, although he is incapable of giving back any more.

Violence and Cruelty

It is one of the basic principles of this novel that the characters depicted are seething, waiting to explode into violence. Oates springs the book's rare violent episodes on her readers very infrequently, making the raw details all that much more shocking because they are embedded within long sections of emotional inquiry. Startling episodes, such as the shooting of Bernie Malin, Maureen's beating by Furlong, the discovery of Bernard Geffen with his throat slit and Nadine's attempted homicide/suicide show with a degree of intensity that is unmatched by what precedes them.

The acts of violence cannot be considered complete surprises, though, because the possibility of sudden violence is always with these characters. One reason for this is that they associate violence and cruelty with love: Brock believes he is saving Loretta and Furlong thinks he is saving Maureen, and Nadine believes that shooting Jules is the only solution to her love for him. In the end, this connection between love and cruelty is shown openly in the behavior of Vera, who takes abuse from Jules and degrades herself as a prostitute while proclaiming her love for him.

The smoldering violence within these characters is symbolized by fire throughout the story. Bernie Malin talks about his plans to burn down a store that cheated him; Jules sets a barn on fire as a child ("I can do anything," he tells his young sister, and believing his power she asks him, as the fire rages out of control, "Could you stop it now?"); the rioters burn down the poor sections of Detroit in their frustration over social inequality. "Fire burns and does its duty," Jules tells a television interviewer, and he goes on to explain, "Violence can't be singled out from an ordinary day! ... Everyone must live through it again and again, there's no end to it, no land to get to, no clearing in the midst of the cities□who wants parks in the midst of the cities!□parks won't burn!"

Style

Structure

them is divided into three unequal sections. The first, "Children of Silence," begins with Loretta as a teenager, living a lonely life with her drunken, deranged father. The father is a vague presence who does not actually appear in the novel, and young Loretta spends hours standing in front of a mirror, repeating her own name, wondering who she is. This section ends with Loretta's daughter, Maureen, who has been saving money to move away and establish her own identity, having her money and dignity stolen away at the hands of her drunken stepfather, who beats her mercilessly.

The second section, "To Whose Country Have I Come?" begins with Maureen in a year-long catatonic state as a result of the beating she has survived. This section is mainly concerned with Jules's affair with Nadine Greene, following the path of his meeting her uncle and working for him to his first sighting of Nadine, obsessing over her, and finally meeting her; their cross-country odyssey and her eventual abandonment of Jules; and, years later, after she is forgotten, Nadine's reappearance in Detroit and their subsequent love affair, which culminates in her shooting him and herself. This section ends with the line "The spirit of the Lord departed from Jules," which seems to mean that Jules has died but turns out to only be a preparation for the empty condition of his soul in the final part, which is called, "Come, My Soul, That Hath Long Languished ... " In this section, which is barely half as long as the others, Jules wanders the streets, scarcely aware of time passing or his own actions, physically recovered from being shot but not much more awake than Maureen after her beating. The focus of this section is, of course, the riot, which as a flurry of irrational violence symbolizes the torment that has been suppressed throughout the rest of the book.

Naturalism

At first glance, this book seems to carry on the tradition of naturalism that became popular at the end of the nineteenth century by French writers like Emile Zola and Edmond Louis Antoine de Goncourt and, as urban crowding began to develop in America, in the novels of Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Upton Sinclair. These writers wrote naturalistic novels to portray the struggles of the urban poor. "Naturalism" is used to describe books that are usually set in cities, showing how the morality of society's worst elements tends to dominate in crowds, dragging the novels' protagonists down into moral corruption. Shocking, graphic details are often used in naturalism to offend readers' sensibilities and make them feel outrage toward poverty's destructive effects.

them is so insistent about revealing human nature that it pretends to identify, in the "Author's Note" and in the letters addressed to the author, a solid link between the characters' world and the natural world that we live in. Critics have pointed out,

however, that this novel does not accurately follow all of the traditions of naturalism. In the naturalistic novel the environment usually defeats the central characters, forcing them to abandon their own values and ideals and act cruelly, animalistically, for their own self-preservation.

This holds true in *them* to some extent, especially regarding Jules's traumatized behavior in the last section, where he heartlessly turns Vera to prostitution and ends up killing a man in cold blood. However, a true naturalistic novel would leave its characters without hope, and at the end Jules can at least look forward to his future in California and Maureen can have a new life in the suburbs. Also, a naturalistic novel would not hesitate to present violent, unpleasant details that would offend readers, trying consciously to change their views of the world, but, as Oates explains in the introductory passage of *them,* "the various sordid and shocking events of slum life, detailed in other naturalistic works, have been understated here, mainly because of my feat that too much reality would become unbearable." Critics have called *them* a parody of naturalism, using the techniques of naturalism to tell a gripping tale but lacking the social conviction.

Sturm and Drang

The German phrase *sturm und drang,* meaning "Storm and Stress," refers to a literary movement in Germany in the late eighteenth century. The most notable examples of the Sturm and Drang movement are Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Freidrich von Schiller's play *The Robbers,* from 1781. These works place great emphasis on the role of the author's imagination, while *them* claims to be a biographical work that is hardly imaginative at all. Still, the character of Jules Wendall seems to have come from the same sense of internal conflict that prevailed centuries earlier.

One of the defining characteristics of Sturm and Drang works was the struggle of the highly emotional individual against the confines of the social structure. At first, Jules appears to be anything but "emotional," since he spends most of the novel unaware of what he is feeling inside. Still, his romantic infatuations toward women that appear to be chosen randomly, such as Sister Mary Jerome, Edith Kamensky, and especially Nadine, seem to clearly qualify him as a suffering romantic figure. He is not entirely out of sync with his environment, as seen by the fact that he is always able to secure employment and to strike up relationships with women effortlessly. Jules is at odds with the world around him, possessing a mind that longs for nobler things but is constantly dragged down to the commonplace.

Historical Context

Protest against the War

In 1969, protests against the war in Vietnam brought the ideas of radicalism and revolution into the living rooms of ordinary Americans. Opposition to the war started out on college campuses, with skeptical professors pointing out the inconsistencies in the government's policies and rebellious students who were willing to rise up and challenge the authorities. America's entry into the war had been gradual and subtle, which was one reason that mainstream Americans had accepted it until antiwar demonstrators became very vocal.

After World War II ended in 1945, Communist forces tried to take control of Vietnam, and their struggle resulted in the country being split into two, communist North Vietnam and democratic South Vietnam. France, which had formerly held the country as a colony, helped to support the South from 1946 to 1954, and when new hostilities began between the two halves, the United States stepped in, first with financial and military aid and then, starting in 1961, with U.S. soldiers. By the end of 1965 nearly 200,000 Americans were fighting in Vietnam to help support democracy in the South.

Because of technological advances in film and video, images of the horrors of war were broadcast around the world during the Vietnam crisis (by contrast, television had been virtually nonexistent during World War II, twenty years earlier). Americans became aware of the human costs of warfare as they had never been before, just as intellectuals were raising questions about the moral righteousness of the conflict. One particular incident that served to raise public indignation was the My Lai Massacre, during which a company of U.S. soldiers entered the village of My Lai in 1968 and, according to the subsequent army investigation, committed acts of murder, rape, sodomy and maiming, leaving hundreds of Vietnamese civilians dead.

News of the massacre was suppressed by the army until 1970: by that time, the majority of Americans wanted the war over. The antiwar movement gained popularity with peaceful demonstrations, such as 1969's March on Washington that was attended by a quarter of a million men, women, and children. There was also, however, a violent, radical side to the antiwar movement, and this segment tended to draw attention, mostly because of the paradox of their using violence to protest violence. In 1969, for instance, the Weather Underground broke off from the mostly peaceful Students for a Democratic Society and urged its members to bomb government buildings. Across the country, dozens of splinter groups with no clear agenda, like the UUAP group depicted in *them,* managed to associate themselves with the opposition to the war simply because their main purpose was opposition.

Racial Tension

At the end of the Civil War in 1865, slavery was officially abolished in the United States: segregation, however, was not. For almost a hundred years it was still legal to deny housing or jobs to people because of their racial background. In Southern states, segregation was even more pronounced than it was in the North, with laws that prohibited whites and Blacks from riding on the same buses, attending the same schools, staying at the same hotels, drinking from the same water fountains, and more. Opposition to these conditions grew after the end of the Second World War in 1945: having served beside whites in the military and been to countries like France that did not have segregation laws, black soldiers returned home expecting better than they received.

During the 1950s great advances were made toward racial equality. The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* made it illegal to hide behind the pretense of offering "separate but equal" facilities to the races (which, while separate, were almost always unequal, portioning out substandard conditions to Blacks). The year-long boycott of the Montgomery Alabama bus system in 1956, led by Martin Luther King Jr., resulted in a Supreme Court ruling the next year that outlawed segregation in transportation.

Whites who felt threatened by Blacks' gains did what they could to resist social change: violence against Blacks by the Ku Klux Klan rose in the 1950s and 1960s as social progress was made. Sometimes the resistance was led by people in otherwise respectable positions. When the Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, led protestors in jeering the first Blacks legally allowed in Little Rock's Central High School, the president of the United States had to send federal troops to maintain order. Georgia restaurant owner Lester Maddox handed out ax handles in front of his shop in 1964, encouraging people to use them to beat any Blacks who tried to enter: as a result, he was elected Governor of Georgia in 1967. By the mid-1960s, crowded urban areas populated by frustrated Blacks began breaking out in race riots: Harlem and Philadelphia in 1964; the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965 (which still stands as one of the worst citizen uprisings in U.S. history); Chicago, Cleveland, and Atlanta in 1966; and 127 cities in 1967, including Boston, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Tampa, and Detroit. In the 1967 Detroit riot, the one described at the end of *them,* Blacks and whites looted 1,700 stores, and rioters set 1,142 fires, leaving 5,000 people homeless. The disturbance continued until armed federal troops were sent.

Critical Overview

When *them* was first published, critics focused, naturally enough, on the contemporary elements of the book, comparing the urban world that Oates described to the one at hand. Reviewing the book for *The New York Times Book Review,* Robert M. Adams found it to be "an impressive piece of fictional construction," and he expressed the opinion that it was more "a step forward" than her previous novel. One particular weakness that Adams pointed out was the "extended satire on a group of rather tiresome psychotics supposed to represent the New Left as it flourished in Detroit a few years ago," referring to the book's Mort Piercy and his conspirators: "fictionally speaking," Adams wrote, "they are just not worth the effort." He also was uncomfortable with the letters from Maureen, addressed to "Miss Oates": "the situation seems arch and contrived beyond any psychological or narrative advantage which it in fact yields."

Reviewing *them* in *Newsweek,* novelist Geoffrey Wolff was impressed with its gruesome imagery. He started his review saying, "This novel is a charnel house of Gothic paraphernalia: blood, fire, insanity, anarchy, lust, corruption, death by bullets, death by cancer, death by plane crash, death by stabbing, beatings, crime, riot and even unhappiness." Like many reviewers, Wolff did not openly claim to not like the book, but his resistance to it was implied in the way that he stated his approval: "The novel gathers us into its black dreams of murder and fire and revenge by chanting their images at us. It needs its great length; we resist its extravagances: finally, it overwhelms us."

Assessing Oates's book of short stories published the following year, R. Z. Sheppard referred back to *them* to help make a point about the author's particular talent: "[The stories] feel the emotion of emotion's lack, a heaviness that Miss Oates conveys with the same compassionate talent that helped make her novel *them* last year's National Book Award winner." Calvin Bedient's review in *Nation,* needs no further discussion: his title, "Brilliant and Dazzling," sums up the admiration shown for the novel throughout the whole review.

them was one of Oates's earliest novels. In the ensuing years, reviewers have come to accept the manner in which she introduces suddenly violent imagery into peaceful situations. Rather then referring to her as a strangely dark novelist, her reputation grew in the 1970s to that of a strangely prolific novelist. It quickly became apparent that her tremendous output did not take anything away from the quality of her work, that she was a writer to be seriously considered, analyzed and put into the larger perspective of American fiction. In that respect, the thrust of analyses of *them* has shifted over the years, from its frightening view of reality to its place as a book that might be shelved with others under the category of "naturalism."

Writing almost twenty years after the book's first appearance, Eileen Bender disputed the idea that it is a naturalistic novel, claiming it to be instead "an apparent challenge to the authority of the dominant novelistic voice." It is not unusual for later reviewers to have the luxury to look at the irregularities of a book's voice, and Bender had the benefit

of having seen Oates write in many different genres, which made it clear to her that the strangely passive voice of the book was intentional, an artistic experiment.

As years have passed, analyses of the book have become increasingly intellectual, probing the psychological depth of the characters with greater concentration than most real people have on their lives. One of the most obvious examples of this is in the book-length dissection of Oates's characters in Brenda Daly's *Lavish Self-Delusions,* which bears just one short phrase on the back of the dust jacket: "How Oates's Father-Identified Daughters of the 1960's Became Self-Defining Women in the 1980's." It is unlikely that Oates could have predicted that her characters would one day be subjected to the cross-referencing between psychology and classic mythology that Daly applies to her books. For example: "Despite antidemonic forces in the United States, Jules still dreams of flowing out and into Nadine, of losing himself in her. Tragically, Nadine cannot allow such a flowing forth of her passion. Certain icy beliefs enclose her in a bell jar that she cannot escape." Very few writers can survive this kind of close scrutiny, and it is to Oates's credit, as well as to Daly's, that the novel she wrote at a rapid pace can hold together after so much time has passed and so many intellects have thought it over.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

McIntosh-Byrd is a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following essay she explores the roles of class and gender in constructing the oppressive physical reality of the characters in them.

Joyce Carol Oates's 1969 novel *them* presents an extended meditation on the complex social and cultural pressures that contribute to the construction of class and gender. This can be seen most vividly in the elaborate representation of bodies as they are experienced, felt, used, and hated by her various characters. Though the definition of women as bodies by themselves and their culture is the primary focus of critique, this pressure is felt by all of *them.* Gender restriction is always viewed through and altered by the lens of social class, and the poorer male characters experience the same pressure to define themselves through physical reality. No one is more typified than Jules, who thinks of himself as a "spirit struggling with the fleshy earth, the very force of gravity, death." He is caught in the "dark machinery" of life that impedes the brightest of the Wendall family, reduced to the status of an object for experimentation that leaves him near-blind, even as he struggles to be more than the sum of his parts.

The narrative insistence on the fundamentally *tactile* life of the poor characters is a subtle liter-alization of the class-based striation to which they are subjected. As members of an industrial society they are "hands," "workers," and□in the case of women□objects to be filled and used. Subjected to this continual pressure, they are denied the ability to understand each other as anything but tangible surfaces. The expression of emotional reaction is consistently channeled into definitions of physical states. This is typified by Maureen's attempt to articulate what she fears about her father's personality□"there was something dense about her father and, beneath that density, a sharpness that was frightening."

Even in describing character, the language choices available to the Wendalls are those of weight, form and shape. This reaches its extreme in disassociative views of the disempowered as objects. In this way, the elderly poor, consigned to bottom-rung care, become forgettable objects that simply drop out of the narrative. Grandma Wendall, Loretta's father and Uncle Brock become "broken machinery" and disappear from the novel, in the same way that Howard Wendall makes his mechanical exit under literal machinery and leaves his family unmoved. In an industrial culture that values them as interchangeable cogs in a greater machine, these people must inevitably see each other as disposable objects. Exiled from the intellectual and literary lives of their social betters, all that is left to them is flesh and blood. Maureen, sitting in the hospital, can only see body parts□"the smooth, innocent curve of a skull beneath thin white hair." As she says, "Everything was the same in this world outside of novels."

Within the novel, an insistence on physicality is the hallmark of social pressures on the poor, and it reaches its greatest power when applied to poor women. This is perhaps best seen through a close analysis of Loretta's physical reality, since she□ unlike Maureen and Jules□both embraces and glorifies in her status as an industrial object. In

tracing the complex factors that lead her to this state, we can find Oates's essential interrogation of the logic of industrial capitalist culture. An understanding of Loretta's mindset also provides a clearer picture of the model against which not just her children, but *all* of the denizens of Detroit eventually rebel.

The opening of the novel finds Loretta standing in front of a mirror, in love with her physical presence. This joy in her corporeal beauty and sensuality does not come from her sense of herself as an individual, beautiful woman. Rather, it comes from precisely the opposite direction. Loretta is in love:

with the fact that there were so many Lorettas, that she'd seen two girls in one week with a sailor outfit like her own.

It is her anonymity, not her singularity, that she embraces. Delighting in the reproducibility of her surface contours, the "good clean skin" in front of "a universe of skin," Loretta is in "love with the fact of girls like her having come into existence." Her relationship to the mirror is the key to her relationship with the world. A happily generic component of an identical social group, she is both the replication of a category and replicable category□ a copy of "girls like her" and a version of girlhood that can be copied by others. In the same way, the reflection in the mirror is both her product (a mirror-image of her body) as well as her producer (the means by which she defines her worth).

Product of an industrialized city, she and her interchangeable female peers represent a factory assembly line version of the American dream□a commercially available, efficient standard to which anyone can aspire. Their identity has become inescapably entwined with making themselves identical; in the paradoxical act of erasing their identity. To paraphrase Henry Ford's famous line, you can have any girl you want, as long as it's this girl. Success is measured by the degree to which she and her peers succeed in molding their lives to exact specifications, a pressure to conform that only increases over time. In this way, Loretta's desire to be the same as everyone else gets greater after her marriage, and consistently finds its expression through an elaboration of physical form. As the narrator says:

it pleased her and her friends to see how uniform everything was. They were anxious for everything to be uniform. They wanted to sink into the neighborhood, just as their flesh wanted to take seed in it and stretch itself to a more prodigious health.

Her culture's obsession with movies is equally important in helping Loretta to define herself as a physical object. Throughout her life, but nowhere more so than in her adolescence, she experiences reality through the presence of an imagined Hollywood camera that records her actions, assesses her appearance, and makes her the heroine of any given moment. Like her interaction with the mirror, this imagined camera forces a perspective shift from internal to external self-viewing, making her a viewed physical body instead of a viewing personality. This material detachment from herself becomes strongest when she is most involved, acting as a technical means by which emotional

pain is transmuted into observed drama. When Brock confronts her with the rumors that she's been fooling around, for example, she feels:

like a heroine in a movie, confronted by a jealous husband in a kitchen while outside the camera is aching to draw back and show a wonderland of adventures waiting for her.

In Loretta's story we also see the role of celebrity in an industrialized, mass-produced culture. It acts as a state of uniform veneration for a given object or person that is felt by uniform members of a culture. The consensus which celebrity thus demands, the necessity of large numbers of people thinking in exactly the same way, acts as yet another form of social control. Loretta combines cultural iconography, physicality, and death in one quasi-religious impulse. After she hears about a woman who soaked her hemline in Dillinger's blood, she is filled with envy, and:

wished violently that she had been there too, to kneel in the blood and bring it back home in triumph, because there wasn't much else to remember a man by except something raw and ugly, and that blood had been real enough in him.

Though she clearly believes that movies, bodies, and celebrity combine to make a lasting version of reality, this passage is juxtaposed with the shooting of Bernie while he lies in her bed. Even as she runs from his body□"something raw and ugly"□in search of help, her overriding narrative of herself continues and takes over from memory. Significantly, the object that catches her attention is a photograph of the Dionne quintuplets, the babies whose ruthless manipulation by a sensation hungry media, servicing a public of Lorettas, has become shorthand for exploitation. The horrors that underlie the mass marketed baby photo are irrelevant to her life, just as the brutality and blood of Bernie's body are an irrelevancy, and will be forgotten in a matter of days. He will remain in her memory only as an instance of "glamour"□the proof she uses occasionally to persuade her children and herself that she was, and is, "really something." In the same way, the fact that Howard raped and extorted her is glossed out in the interests of the script. Instead, he becomes a man who appeared "out of nowhere early on a Sunday morning, dressed in a policeman's uniform and come to help her."

The behaviors that Loretta has learned from obediently watching and worshipping proscribed icons have not given her a means to express her love and pain. The focus on representations of bodies□imagined snapshots, movie cameras and newsreels□serves the opposite purpose, reducing real physical destruction to a disposable status. Most of the men in Loretta's life do indeed depart in ways that leave something "raw and ugly." Bernie is shot, Howard is crushed by falling machinery, her second husband leaves her daughter a bloody pulp, and yet Loretta forgets as soon as the act is over. She attempts to understand this after Jules is traumatized by the sight of a plane crash that leaves a man with his head sliced in two by the side of the road□these things just don't stick with her too clearly. As she says of motherhood, the funny thing about having babies is that as soon as they're not in the room with you, it's like you don't have them any more.

In the world that Loretta gives her children, things only exist when they can be immediately seen and touched, and can only be understood through an elaboration of their tangible qualities. As Maureen learns when trying to speak with this vocabulary of the body, Loretta's system of signification cannot express anger. In an extended attempt to show the structural basis of the outbreaks of physical violence, which characterize the lives of Jules, Betty, and the working poor in general, Oates suggests that it is this enforced poverty of language which is to blame. Whenever Loretta feels hurt, or justifiably angry, she has no way of expressing that anger, and thus no way of understanding or venting it. In this way, her dislike of Brock, caused by his abusive, erratic behavior, is turned into distaste for his "flabby, calculating skin."

The Depression-era workers of Loretta's generation have been deliberately and systematically regulated. Fear of worker mobilization and resistance to harsh social environments has led to educational and social environments that deprive the poor of the means with which to express anger. The monotonous physical demands of industrial working culture require a compliant pool of warm bodies who understand themselves as such□bodies. Such a system of thought and regulation leads to violent repercussions in the next generation. It is the reason for the trauma that forces Maureen to prostitute herself□the cause of the paradox she cannot escape which makes her reduce herself to the machinery of warm flesh in her attempt to raise enough money to better herself. It is also the reason for the riots at the end of *them.* Cut off from all legitimate means of protest, unable to express their discontent, the only option left is physical reaction. "They" burn Detroit down.

Source: Tabitha McIntosh-Byrd, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, DeCurtis examines how Oates's characters in them *perceive their lives as unreal and fictional accounts as representative of "real life."*

Two letters written by Maureen Wendall, one of the novel's main characters, to Joyce Carol Oates, the novel's author and Maureen's former teacher, are essential to an understanding of *them.* The letters are passionate, angry, accusatory, and confessional. Maureen challenges Oates with questions, taking her to task for statements she made to her literature class: "You said, 'Literature gives form to life,' I remember you saying that very clearly. What is form? Why is it better than the way life happens, by itself?" The notion that something can provide shape and meaning to our experiences both fascinates and infuriates Maureen, who, like all of Oates's characters, moves in a world in which "Nothing follows" and "anything" can and frequently does happen. A desperate desire for "something to come to us and give a shape to so much pain," pitted against an equally desperate sense that there can be no deliverance from a world so out of control that it "can't be lived" constitutes the conflict which determines so many of the lives in *them.* The tension this conflict produces forces the characters, after attempts to provide order to their lives have failed, to deny the substantiality of their shattering experiences and perceive their lives as fiction. .Oates herself addresses the issue, which Maureen raises, of the dichotomy between literary form and "the way life happens" at the very beginning of *them* in her "Author's Note." Here she announces that she intends the novel to be "a work of history in fictional form." About the life of Maureen Wendall, the subject and source of this personal history, Oates intimates, "My initial feeling about her life was 'This must be fiction, this can't all be real!' My more permanent feeling was, "This is the only kind of fiction that is real!" Oates, of course, is aware that by the very act of writing about Maureen and her family she is taking their experiences out of the world of events and transforming them into literature. However, she stringently resists literary explanations and interpretations for the events in her novel, striving instead to have her readers experience the unfolding action as immediately as her characters themselves do, without the mitigation an overt, overriding aesthetic vision would supply. Unlike most social and psychological novels, *them* is relatively little concerned with questions of cause and motive. "Things" happen, and establishing cause and effect relationships becomes less important, and, in certain ways, less possible than getting on with the day-to-day business of living. In her conception and execution of *them* Oates exploits the tension between the order of fiction and the chaos of reality, the very forces which fragment the lives of the novel's three central characters.In Oates's world, maturity consists of realizing and accepting that there is no design or permanence in one's surroundings and that contentment and hope are taunting invitations to disaster. The future, so much "dangerous time," brings change, and change of any kind is terrible and threatening. Optimism is conceivable only by those too young, too ignorant, or too deranged to know better. Early in the novel, Oates gives us a sunny portrait of Loretta, Maureen Wendall's mother. It is 1937, the country is in the midst of the Depression, and her family is having difficulties. Nonetheless, Loretta is young, cheery, and feels herself full of possibility. In an exuberant moment, she tells

her older friend Rita, "Sometimes I feel so happy over nothing I must be crazy." Rita's reply is at once reassuring and premonitory, the advice of a survivor: "Oh, you're not crazy ... you just haven't been through it yet."

Loretta's remark and Rita's response are relatively tame examples of how madness and the violence with which it is associated always lurk as threats in *them.* The disorder and unpredictability of the external world impose monstrous burdens on its inhabitants, and those who do not succumb to madness live in fear of it. A more compelling instance of the fear of imminent insanity occurs when the narrator describes Loretta's thoughts following her brother's murder of her boyfriend: "And what if she went crazy? ... [She] had seen other crazy people, had seen how fast they changed into being crazy. No one could tell how fast that change might come." Madness and violence do not build up over a period of time, but, like the fires which recur in the novel, appear out of nowhere and immediately rage out of control, reducing all supposed permanence and solidity to cinders. The lines which separate violence and order, madness and sanity, are too thin to be recognizable and one is always in danger of passing unknowingly from one realm into the other. Characters speak frequently of their fear "Of everything, of going over the edge." Jules Wendall, Maureen's brother, warns us and a television audience after the Detroit riots of 1967 near the end of the book that "Violence can't be singled out from an ordinary day."

One result of the chaos and impoverishment of their environment is that economics becomes a crucial concern in the lives of Oates's characters. They tend, however, to perceive money not in economic or political but in mystical terms. Even in relatively small sums, money enables one to exert some degree of control over one's existence and all control is magical when cause and effect are inoperative. Both Maureen and Jules Wendall view money in this spiritual way. When, at one point in the book, Maureen prostitutes herself, she cultivates a pathological detachment from the sexuality of her acts and thinks only of the money she will receive: "It was supposed to be out of sight and out of her concern for the moment. But she thought keenly about it, its passing from his hands into hers, its becoming her money.... Its power would become hers.... [It] was magical in her hands and secret from all the world...." Maureen saves and hides the money she earns and thinks about it to an extent clearly out of proportion to what it can do for her. The obsessive accumulation of money becomes an end in itself; its mystique as a charm against disaster overpowers its practical significance.

In relation to this, access, or seeming access, to large sums of money accords one virtually godlike status in *them.* A wealthy man can raise you out of the mire of your daily existence and set your life to rights by a mere act of will. When Jules Wendall is befriended by the second-rate gangster Bernard Geffen, who tosses checks and large bills around with a mad self-assurance, he experiences not mere joy at his good fortune, but a sense of revelation about the nature of life itself. Bernard gives Jules several hundred dollars, offers him a chauffeur's job at two hundred dollars per week, and promises to finance his college education. Jules reflects that never before "had he really been given a *gift,* a surprising gift of the kind that stuns the heart, that lets you know why people keep on living□why else, except in anticipation of such gifts, such undeserved surprises?" Money is a sign of the gods' favor. It is not architectural

similarity alone which reminds Jules of a church when he walks into a bank to cash one of Bernard's checks.

But, finally, money itself is not lasting protection against the sweeping flood of calamitous events in *them.* Bernard turns out to have no real wealth; his throat is slit in an abandoned tenement by an anonymous killer. Jules's opportunity, later in the book, to rise to power in a business owned by his millionaire Uncle Samson is never realized either. And money also does not prove to be the solution to Maureen's problems. Her stepfather discovers her hidden wealth, as well as her means of earning it, and brutally beats her. The promise which money holds out to the poor, who can only obtain it through humiliation or semi-divine fiat and do not have the means to hold onto it, is insubstantial and only leaves them feeling greater rage and frustration.

Their inability to shape their lives in any positive way makes the characters in *them* yearn for permanence and stability, a sense of the ordinary. If they cannot be what they want to be, if they cannot live how they want to live, they at least want their circumstances to remain constant. For the most part, they identify permanence with traditional American values: a home, a family, and for the women, the role of housewife. As they emerge and are articulated in characters' minds, these values seem not so much to be desirable in themselves but empirical proofs that one has "settled down," has established an entrenched position in the battle of life.

Oates dramatizes this search for permanence early in *them* when Maureen's parents, Loretta and Howard Wendall, marry. Loretta, while she does not seem to love him, is grateful to Howard for providing her with an escape from her troubled home and neighborhood. She and her new married friends share a sense that "they had all come very close to the edge of something" and had managed to avoid toppling over. Determined not to take risks with their survival, they are pleased to see "how uniform" everything is in their new neighborhood. Indeed, "They were anxious for everything to be uniform." Loretta happily thought that "she had come to the end of her life" and "would probably live here forever." Having come through disaster, Loretta, exhibiting the resilience characteristic of the poor in Oates's novels, attempts to reestablish her life in less vulnerable circumstances. The continual disappointment of these efforts is an important motif in *them.*

Maureen Wendall subscribes to the same domestic ideals as her mother, despite Loretta's life having collapsed around them both innumerable times. Trying to rebuild her life after her spell as a prostitute, a savage beating at the hands of her stepfather, and a lengthy period of near-catatonia, Maureen describes her ideal future situation in one of her letters to Oates:

[I'd be] living in a house out of the city, a ranch house or a colonial house, with a fence around the back, a woman working in the kitchen, wearing slacks maybe, a baby in his crib in the baby's room, thin white gauzy curtains, a bedroom for my husband and me, a window in the living-room looking out onto the lawn and the street and the house across the street. Every cell in my body aches for this! My eyes ache for it, the balls of my eyes

in their sockets, hungry and aching for this, my God how I want that house and that man, whoever he is.

It is evident from the passion and precision of detail in this passage that Maureen has experienced this fantasy at least as intensely as she has the pain and frustration of her own life. Indeed, this fictional, imaginative construct has more reality for her than her own unspeakable past.

The vision of suburban bliss, contrasted to urban chaos and decay, has a profound sense of reality, which his own life lacks, for Maureen's brother Jules as well. At one point in the novel, having run away to the South with a girl he met only two days earlier, Jules wanders about looking for a house from which he can steal some money. He spots a housewife walking barefoot across her lawn to pick up a newspaper: "This sight pleased Jules□it was so ordinary and reasonable. Walking alone here, even in his sweaty clothes, he was close to the secret workings of things, the way people lived when they were not being observed. In himself there were no secret workings: he had no ordinary, reasonable life." Jules's sense of his own unreality is so acute in this passage that he discounts even his own role as an observer. If he is watching, it is as if no one is watching. Jules's desire to experience an orderly existence is so strong that after stealing into one of these suburban houses, "On an impulse he lay down on the bed, his feet side by side. He smiled. So this was what it was like." Real life for Jules, and for so many of Oates's characters, cannot be located in his own experiences but only in the way *they* live. And who "they" are depends upon who you are.

The ideal of the "ordinary, reasonable life" is an aspect of the American Dream which has particular appeal for Oates's characters. The housewives' magazines which package this ideal figure significantly in the process of fictionalization at work in *them.* If the great works of art against which Maureen rails with primitive eloquence in her letters to Oates attempt to give shape to people's suffering, these magazines try to short-circuit human pain and reduce the complexities of life to a series of simpleminded rules. Jim Randolph's wife, whom he is about to abandon along with their three children for Maureen Wendall, reads these magazines regularly and one is described in some detail. A cake adorns the cover of this issue, which includes such articles as "A Doctor Looks at Intimate Problems of Marriage," and "The Five Basic Don'ts": " 'Don't worry needlessly. Don't expect too much, particularly from your husband. Don't compare yourself to your friends. Don't take anything for granted. Don't daydream.'"

This magazine and others of its kind perform a double function for their readers. They sugarcoat and simplify life while simultaneously endorsing the same fearful passivity and timidity which was reflected in the lives of Loretta and her friends. The "Five Basic Don'ts" caution ominously against expecting or demanding too much from life. Exerting the merest pressure even on one's spouse will reveal the precariousness and the emptiness of one's existence. In this light, the fact that Maureen is reading one of these magazines in the final scene of the book is unmistakable in its significance. Jules has come to visit Maureen after she has married Jim Randolph and escaped from Detroit to the suburbs. The magazine, the presence of Jules as a symbol of a past she can never completely escape, and the physical instability of her new surroundings ("he reached

out to touch the railing of the stairwell□it was plastic□and she saw how wobbly it was, ready to fall off if someone bumped against it") combine to demonstrate how tenuous Maureen's hold on an "ordinary, reasonable life" is.

In addition to housewives' magazines, the movies provide another standard by which characters in *them* measure the "reality" of their own lives. Loretta and Jules, particularly, regard films, however implausibly optimistic they may be, as expressions not of how life should be, but of how life *is.* They perceive the disparity between the movies they watch and their own experiences not as the result of a cinematic distortion of reality, but as an indication of something unidentifiable but nevertheless very real lacking in their own disaster-ridden lives. As the events on the screen are "realized" before their eyes and in their minds, their own lives become fictionalized, unreal. Their experiences have all the drama and passion of the movies but want the shaping power of an aesthetic vision to lend them clarity and wholeness. In contrast to the quietistic housewives' magazines, the movies portray a world in which heroics are daily events, and boldness and aggression, potentially fatal traits in the treacherous world of *them,* are always rewarded.

The joy, optimism, and promise of Loretta's youth, lost to her through events which she cannot comprehend, are associated in her mind with the movies. She watches films uncritically, too delightfully absorbed in the actions unfolding before her to judge them in any way. "Oh, it was real nice, I liked it fine," is her standard opening remark when discussing a movie she's seen. She describes one movie at some length. The windup of the complicated plot, which pivots on the sudden financial collapse of a wealthy man, is "the stock market goes back up. The Butler marries one of the maids.... It ends all right." The contrast between the cinematic neatness of this ending and the maddening loose ends of Loretta's own life is obvious and she is not unaware of it. In a passage as poignant as it is passionate she tells her children: "I want to be like people in that movie, I want to know what I'm doing .... I wasn't meant to be like this□I mean, stuck here. Really I wasn't. I don't look like this. I mean, my hair, and I'm too fat. I don't really look like *this,* I look a different way." The violence of the "real" world has somehow distorted Loretta's true self; not only has her life not proceeded the way it was "supposed to," her very physical appearance is a deception. The real world has created a fictional Loretta whose "true" existence can be perceived only on the screen. Things do not seem to her as if they will end "all right"; Loretta is living episodes which in the edited world of film would have wound up on the cutting-room floor.

Not surprisingly, since he is her first and favorite child, Jules shares Loretta's fascination with the fictional world of the movies. We are told that "Much of Jules's life had come from the movies, much of his language and his good spirits." Jules's sense of himself as an individual predestined for good fortune can be traced directly back to his perception of himself as a fictional character. In his youth Jules "thought of himself as a character in a book being written by himself, a fictional fifteen-year-old with the capacity to become anything, because he was fiction. What couldn't he make out of himself?" His imagination "heated by the memory of movies," Jules continually distances himself from his life and comments on it as a spectator might. "This looks like Chapter One," he exclaims to himself when it seems as if Bernard Geffen is going to help him realize all

his hopes. *"This is Jules in Texas,"* he thinks at one point, so alienated from his surroundings that he refers to himself, as he does repeatedly in the book, in the third person. He lives an internal life once removed from external reality: "Endlessly Jules had pursued Jules, in endless stories and dreams...." And, like Loretta, he has an inner sense of a "true Jules" to whom certain events and situations are grossly inappropriate, indeed, unreal, and betrayals of his essential self.

The extent to which Jules and Loretta view the world in which they move as unreal in some elemental way indicates how little their lives have measured up to their expectations. They are intensely disappointed people. Denial is the only psychic mechanism which can keep them functional in the face of the catastrophes which characterize their lives. Jules's feeling that his *"life is a story imagined by a madman"* conveys fully how bizarre and frightening his existence seems to him. Loretta's resiliency is the virtue of a woman who has been so battered by incessant blows that she cannot fully comprehend how appalling her life has been. As the novel goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that Jules's "optimism" is a delusion of psychotic proportions. His sense of his own unreality intensifies until he is convinced that he is "not a character in 'real life'."

Maureen Wendall also succumbs to the fictionalizing impulse so thematically prominent in *them.* As a schoolgirl, terrified by the nightmarish world which surrounds her, she turns to literature, particularly the novels of Jane Austen, for succor and release. Like Loretta and Jules, however, she perceives the structured world of fiction as real and her own life as false and insubstantial. Reading novels, Maureen feels like someone waking up from a horrible dream, escaping not from but into reality. Oates writes that Maureen "liked novels set in England. As soon as she read the first page of a novel by Jane Austen she was pleased, startled, excited to know that this was real: the world of this novel was real. Her own life, up over Elson's Drugs or back on Labrosse, could not be real." For Maureen, the less like her own life these books are in tone, setting, and event, the more real they become.

Even the money which Maureen earns as a prostitute becomes associated in her mind with the literature she loves, the fantasy of freedom coupling with the fantasy of escape. The money she receives for her acts is described as being "as real as a novel by Jane Austen," and she hides it, significantly, in a book, *Poets of the New World.* In some magical way, her money will provide her life with the order and sense of reality that she experiences when reading fiction. She will live in a "New World"; her own life will be as "real" as an Austen novel. The irony, of course, is that the power of money to change Maureen's life *is* as real as an Austen novel, that is, not real at all, but fictional.

Though similar in her distrust of the reality of her own experiences, Maureen proves ultimately to be neither as vapid as her mother nor as psychotically deluded as Jules. Like them, she is intensely angry that her life will not sort itself out as precisely as a work of fiction, but she finally rebels against the conviction that her experiences are any less authentic for that reason. Her own maddening and disorganized life comes eventually to have full significance for her. She writes in one of her letters to Oates: "Why did you think that book about Madame Bovary was so important? All those books?

Why did you tell us they were more important than life? They are not more important than my life." Maureen reviles Oates for her knowledge of literature, for "knowing so much that never happened," and against the claim that literature gives form to life asserts that, "I lived my life but there is no form to it. No shape."

Clearly, Maureen's vehemence is generated by her desire for control over her life, her wish for a "law. Something that will come back again and again, that I can understand." Maureen only begins to exercise some power over her fate, as morally questionable and precarious as that power is, when she refuses to persist in fictionalizing her life as Jules and Loretta do. By respecting and rooting herself in her own experiences, she shows that she has learned the most important lesson art has to teach. If, at the end of the book, Maureen's life is not as firmly grounded as she would like to think it is, nor her calculated stealing of another woman's husband in her pursuit of the suburban dream as elevated either in motive or goal as we would like, she is at least not being swept along by the tide of events as directly as Loretta and Jules are. It is significant that she is virtually unaffected by the Detroit riots which burn down her mother's home and turn her brother into a murderer. Though Maureen does not realize it, *Madame Bovary* and the novels of Austen have helped her achieve what grade-B movies and housewives' magazines never can provide: a sense of the dignity and importance of her own life.

Robert H. Fossum has argued rightly in asserting that Oates's fiction "evokes an overwhelming sense of those psychological pressures in American life which produce our obsessions and frustrations, our dreams of love and power, our struggles to understand the world and ourselves." Oates renders convincingly the psychological impulse of individuals to turn to fictional forms for meaning, indeed, to attempt to fictionalize their own lives, in the face of appalling social conditions. It is nonetheless regrettable that political analyses and solutions are treated with as little grace and insight as they are in *them,* a novel so much concerned, both explicitly and indirectly, with such social issues as urban decay, poverty, race relations, violence, and the urgent flight by white people from the inner city to the suburbs. Mort Piercy, the most important political figure in the book, is depicted as an overgrown, spoiled, upper-middle-class child, quite probably insane, who wages an irresponsible war against the "Establishment" on government Poverty Program grants. His friends are privileged University "radicals" with frightening delusions of grandeur. Whatever idealism they exhibit is quickly revealed to be a shallow cover for paranoia and repressed sociopathic impulses. Their political discussions never address real issues but revolve around whether, during the Detroit riots, it would be more in the interest of the revolution to assassinate President Johnson or murder Martin Luther King and blame it on the right wing. Most disturbing of all, Oates clearly suggests that the Detroit riots were organized and orchestrated from behind the scenes by a small band of cynical and deluded whites of whom Mort Piercy is only the most prominent example.

Yet, despite the caricaturish treatment of politics in *them,* Oates seems to demand by her very choice of title some discussion of a collective solution to the problems which the novel assumes as its subject. The radical alienation of characters from themselves, the condition which is expressed by their fictionalizing their own lives, can be seen as the reflection within the individual of a society whose various classes and races regard

each other as threatening and monolithic "thems." Oates maintains that her novel "is truly about a specific 'them' and not just a literary technique of pointing to us all" (Author's Note). But the specificity of the referent for "them" seems to shift as the psychological and the social intermingle, and every individual and social group projects their problems, obsessions, and terrors onto a certain "them." "Them niggers" serve such a function for several of the white characters in the book. Jules's upper-class girlfriend, Nadine, frightened and disgusted by the sexual cravings which Jules awakens in her, is tormented by irrational fears that he has slept with diseased black girls and will infect her. Maureen Wendall moves out of Detroit after marrying Jim Randolph to get away from her past and "them" (specifically, here, her family and the psychological forces and social class which they represent), but Jules tracks her down and she does not know how to answer him when he asks, "But, honey, aren't you one of *them* yourself?" Oates's characters, like all of us, carry within themselves psychological versions of the social problems which surround them. That in her sharp and incisive focus on the psychological Oates does not take similar care with the social is a disservice both to them and her audience.

By the end of *them* we are left with both the possibility of stagnation and the hope for change. To recommend narrow solutions to the complex issues which the novel raises would be a great mistake and Oates carefully avoids doing so. While asserting the necessity that Oates acknowledge the social context of her work in a responsible way, I recognize that she should not be held to any ideological line. Like other contemporary novelists of worth, Oates realizes that we are not always better off for our painful experiences, that suffering and disaster do not always lead us to self-discovery but often leave us constricted, terrified of change and what the future holds, doubtful about the substantiality of our experiences. She knows that perhaps the most dreadful thing about apocalyptic events is that too often they do not destroy us but leave us to face another "ordinary morning." The instinct for survival becomes a virtue in this connection. And to the extent to which her characters can survive without dividing the world of others into "them" and us, and fictionalizing their own lives, they have done very well indeed.

Source: Anthony DeCurtis, "The Process of Fictionaliza-tion in Joyce Carol Oates's *them," in International Fiction Review,* Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer, 1979, pp. 121-28.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Giles examines the debate over classification of Oates's writing, considering the views of those who declare it naturalism or romanticism, and Oates's own preference for the phrase "psychological realism. "

A unique tension, which has resulted in much critical confusion, runs throughout the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates. Attempts to define the philosophy and technique behind her novels have usually been limited and misleading. Critics and reviewers have primarily attempted to place her within the tradition of naturalism. However, while there are strong naturalistic overtones to her best work, she should not be seen solely as a Dreiser-Norris-Farrell naturalist. The charge of melodrama is frequently hurled at her. Of course, one isn't surprised, since melodrama has always been closely tied to American literary naturalism (e.g., the death of S. Behrman in *The Octopus).* The apparently melodramatic aspects of Oates's fiction have taken at least one critic in a different direction. Writing about her short stories, Samuel F. Pickering, Jr., has charged Oates with the literary crime of "Romanticism." While never defining Romanticism, Pickering specifically objects to Oates's extreme subjectivity, lack of a sense of humor, and excessive solemnity. Pickering also believes that Oates has become so intrigued with the infinite terrain of the subconscious that she is losing the ability to communicate.

Oates herself has defined her esthetic technique. In the "Afterword" to her recent volume of experimental parables, *The Poisoned Kiss* (1975), she writes that her usual fiction is a "synthesis of the 'existential' and the 'timeless'"; and in the Preface to the collection of stories *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* she accepts the term "psychological realism" (1974) as representative of her mode of writing....

them illustrates better than any other Oates novel the esthetic tension which results when she naturalistically documents a brutal environment while simultaneously describing doomed, romantic attempts to escape that environment. Three characters are central to *them*□Loretta Wendall and her two children, Maureen and Jules. The characterization of Loretta pertains to Oates's comments about the spiritual destruction resulting from economic suffering. At the beginning of the novel, Loretta is a proud, healthy girl:

Behind her good clear skin was a universe of skin, all of it healthy. She loved this, she was in love with the fact of girls like her having come into existence, though she could not have expressed her feelings exactly.

Loretta's sense of well-being has survived her father's loss of his business, his subsequent drinking and going "bad" in his treatment of the family, her mother's death, and a dangerous brother named Brock, who repeatedly threatens to kill someone. In fact, Loretta has instinctively found an escape from her threatening environment□a young thug named Bernie Malin, who has "whatever it was that kept people from falling through the bottom of the world the way her brother had fallen."

From the opening pages, the characterization of Loretta challenges conventional morality, as well as many liberal rationalist assumptions. Without thinking about it, she has intuited an escape she will use the beauty of her body to entrap a young man who hardly can be labeled sympathetic in order to escape the hell of her home. Loretta has never had the opportunity to grow intellectually; she is a woman in a male-dominated society; and she simply plans to use the weapons she has. What is significant is that she still views herself as a valuable, beautiful young woman. But the plan for escape quickly falls apart: she does seduce Bernie; but in the night he is murdered by her crazed brother. A policeman named Howard Wendall comes to investigate, quickly realizes the situation, sexually takes Loretta, and then marries her in exchange for covering up the murder of Bernie. Since all of this happens in the first fifty pages of a five-hundred page novel, it is easy to understand why Oates is sometimes dismissed as a writer of violent melodrama.

Her answer to such criticism can be found in the essay on *The Dollmaker:*

It seems to me that the greatest works of literature deal with the human soul caught in the stampede of time, unable to gauge the profundity of what passes over it, like the characters in certain plays of Yeats who live through terrifying events but who cannot understand them; in this way history passes over most of us. Society is caught in a convulsion, whether of growth or death, and ordinary people are destroyed. They do not, however, understand that they are "destroyed."

In short, in a crumbling society, things happen that way. This answer is not a completely convincing refutation of the charge of esthetic melodrama. It is probable that Oates ultimately would not care to argue the point, but would simply say that the lives of the victims of our society are melodramatic in ways that the middle-class reader cannot begin to understand. She may even feel that such a reader needs to be shocked into an awareness of what surrounds him.

At any rate, Loretta never understands anything for the rest of the novel, even though she lives in the midst of monumental events. She is destroyed: her new husband loses his job on the police force; she moves to the country, and while Howard is in the service she suffers from the tyranny of Papa and Mama Wendall; she escapes to Detroit, where she is immediately arrested on a charge of prostitution; her husband and Mama Wendall ultimately join her in Detroit, and Howard is killed in an industrial accident. After Howard's death, she takes a lover who assaults her daughter. Finally, the long-lost brother, whose murder of Bernie Malin plunged her irrevocably into the hell of her life, returns to live with her. All this poverty and instability destroy her looks and her faith in herself. There finally can be no escape for Loretta; and she *does know that.* In a critical speech, she tells her son Jules:

Then we came to Detroit? Then all them dumps, them bus rides? I can't stand always moving around! I want my own place, my own house. I want to be like somebody in a movie, I want to get dressed up and walk down the street and know something important will happen, like this man who was killed because of me .... I wasn't meant to be like this I mean, stuck here. Really I wasn't. I don't look like this. I mean, my hair,

and I'm too fat. I don't really look like *this,* I look a different way. And the toilet is bad again __

Two things are crucial about this speech: Loretta acknowledges the power and possibilities her body once contained and that this power and those possibilities are dead. In addition, she has learned to covet the lives and material things of those who have destroyed her, or, to be more accurate, her movie-induced concept of those lives and those things.

"Problems of Adjustment in Survivors of Natural/Unnatural Disasters," a powerful Oates short story, is centered around the concept of "psychic suicide" among victims. Psychic suicide results when the victim accepts the value system of his oppressors and identifies with them. A character in the story believes that this mental process allowed many people to survive totalitarian concentration camps. Loretta is a reluctant example of psychic suicide. She survives by accepting the values of the capitalistic system which has banished her to the ghetto. In fact, when her son Jules becomes locally prominent through his participation in a revolution against that system, she is horrified. It is important that Loretta's perception of the world of wealth remain always an unreal, celluloid one. Her dreams of this world can remain undefiled; while, in contrast, Jules has a much more direct contact with wealth and power and is irrevocably changed by it. Dreams can sustain one, but only to a degree. Loretta's acceptance of the values of an unattainable world corresponds to the final destruction of that freshness and power she knows she once had. However, unlike Arnow's people, she reveals in speeches such as the one to Jules that she is aware of this destruction.

For a very long time, Loretta instinctively seeks salvation in her children, particularly the two oldest, Jules and Maureen. Both are worthy of being the repositories of much vicarious hope. In fact, both ultimately fulfill their mother's dreams and escape the ghetto, but only at an enormous spiritual cost.

For most of the novel, Maureen Wendall seems one of those passive, eternally victimized females who crowd the pages of Oates's stories and novels. She, in fact, has little opportunity to be anything other than passive or brutally aggressive as her younger sister Betty is. A child of poverty, surrounded by bickering and dehumanized adults, she wants love, or, failing that, simple acceptance. If neither love nor acceptance is possible, a part of her longs for simple deliverance:

She saw them all with their frozen faces, her mother and father, her sister, her brother, her grandmother, her aunt, the faces of the nuns at school, the faces of priests, the faces of kids in the neighborhood, the faces of all the world□frozen hard into expressions of cunning and anger, while she, Maureen, having no hardness to her, crept in silence among them and waited for the day when everything would be orderly and neat, when she could arrange her life the way she arranged the kitchen after supper, and she too might then be frozen hard, fixed, permanent, beyond their ability to hurt.

Although it takes a very long time to surface, Maureen has a great deal of "hardness to her"; she ultimately ceases to be the eternal victim by coolly and deliberately victimizing another woman.

For most of the novel, Maureen seems a classic scapegoat, and nothing better illustrates this surface appearance than the incident of the lost homeroom notebook. When Maureen is chosen secretary of her homeroom at school, she feels pride in herself for the first time. The secretary's official notebook, assigned to her care, symbolizes transcendence over her squalid environment and the factors that limit her existence. It is a tribute to Oates's genius that Maureen's frantic search for that meaningless record of meaningless details constitutes one of the most painful moments of the novel. In a world of murder, assault, continuously accumulating filth and despair, a lost notebook is trivial, but that very triviality is a vital factor in the artistic success of this segment of *them.* The notebook is not trivial to Maureen, because it is the first tangible acceptance from the adult world she has ever received.

It is not long before Maureen comprehends a formula that her mother once intuited: in America, money is a visible and immediate sign of power, men will pay money for her body, and power is a form of acceptance. Maureen sells her body to anonymous strangers in anonymous rooms, and, as in the case of Sister Carrie, the only sin involved rests on society and the inhuman universe. Maureen's sexual promiscuity is, in fact, the beginning of her struggle to save herself. Despite her passive surface, Maureen determines to salvage her soul by escaping, however she can, that landscape that threatens her constantly. (It is of interest that she keeps the money from these affairs in a book called *Poets of the New World.)* That landscape, personified in her mother's brutal lover, intercedes however and she is literally beaten into a coma.

Maureen's will to survive is only resting and it will be revived by that awesome Western force, romantic love. The object of her love is married, and taking him represents a major challenge to her habitual passivity. Strangely, she outlines her plan in some letters to a former teacher at the University of Detroit night school, Joyce Carol Oates. The Maureen Wendall letters are one of the most complex aspects of a very complex novel. In one of them, Oates seems to challenge everything in which she believes. The letter is a series of rambling, at times almost incoherent, pleas and charges:

How can I live my life if the world is like this? The world can't be lived, no one can live it right. It is out of control, crazy.... Maybe I am writing to you not because you are like me□I sound a little crazy!□but because you are the exact opposite, you are never surprised, you foretell everything, and inside all the mess of the newspapers you live your own life in peace, prepared__ Why did you think that book about

Madame Bovary was so important? All those books? Why did you tell us they were more important than life? They are not more important than my life__But you are a married woman, I think, who would not mind taking someone else's husband, so long as it happened well enough, beautifully enough like a story.... You said, "Literature gives form to life," I remember you saying that very clearly. What is form? Why is it better than the way life happens, by itself?

Thus Oates confronts directly the most questionable aspect of her faith in the resanctifying power of art□art is a luxury ordinarily not accessible to or desired by those people who are most victimized. If art is a redemptive ritual, faith in its redemptive power is not shared by "them." Indeed, what can a man or woman struggling to feed a family care about form in literature? But the Maureen Wendall letters answer indirectly the same questions they raise. As a teacher, Joyce Carol Oates stimulated ideas in Maureen Wendall, who communicated again years later. One result of that dual communication is *them,* the form of art.

This letter also indicates that Maureen's spiritual self is stronger than it has ever been (Maureen's life *is* more important to her than Madame Bovary's) and that she intends to take the man she loves. She does, much as Elena Howe takes Jack Morrissey in *Do With Me What You Will;* and the apparent scapegoat escapes the ghetto for life with a university instructor.

Even as a child, Jules Wendall is the rebel, the *alazon.* Once, demonstrating magic to his sister, he sets a barn on fire and receives almost without tears a brutal whipping from his grandmother. He reads an interview in *Time* magazine with an Indian mystic who says "I have come to loot you with love "We are all members of a single human family.... My object is to transform the whole of society. Fire merely burns.... Fire burns and does its duty. It is for others to do theirs." Jules is not converted by this mystic pronouncement, but for the rest of the novel he does try very hard to care for his own human family with love and he is associated with scenes of violent destruction. Even though he participates in the Detroit riots of 1966 and becomes an ironic hero of the revolutionaries, Jules never develops any truly strong social consciousness. Still, he is the most loving and the most spiritually compelling character in the novel.

Part of the reason Jules never evolves into a spokesman for his social class is his intense commitment to the women in his family, especially Maureen. Jules is comparable to a Tom Joad who has not been transformed by a Jim Casy. More important than his family, however, is Nadine Greene, the wealthy girl from Grosse Pointe. Jules can hardly be expected to be a social revolutionary after he falls in love with the personification of that class which oppresses him. Meeting Nadine through a shadowy figure named Bernard Geppen, who has connections with both the underworld and Grosse Pointe, he is immediately drawn to her in the most intensely romantic of ways.

Evidence of the fact that Oates is consciously utilizing the Western tradition of romantic love in the Jules Wendall-Nadine Greene relationship can be seen in her prose. For instance, this is how Oates describes the young man's reaction to his first glimpse of Nadine:

But never had he really been given a *gift,* a surprising gift of the kind that stuns the heart, that lets you know why people keep on living□why else, except in anticipation of such gifts, such undeserved surprises?

The prose account of his initial entry into her bedroom is, if anything, even more romantic:

He kissed her lightly, wanting to put her to sleep with kisses, comfort her, his mouth light against hers like the petals of roses or the fluttering wings of moths, nothing substantial. It was all so airy, even this embrace__How he wanted that intoxication!

Jules's involvement with Nadine is physical but, more importantly, spiritual; and the fact that Nadine is unworthy of any kind of devotion should not diminish our response to the young man's infatuation.

The only importance of Nadine's shallowness is in its ultimate effect on Jules. In an essay from *The Edge of Impossibility,* Oates writes about the love between Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida, and much of what she says is applicable to Jules and Nadine:

Let us examine Troilus' education in terms of his commitment to a sensualized Platonism, a mystic adoration of a woman he hardly knows. He begins as a conventional lover who fights "cruel battle" within and who leaps from extremes of sorrow to extremes of mirth because he has become unbalanced by the violence of what he does not seem to know is lust__

Troilus' tragedy is his failure to distinguish between the impulses of the body and those of the spirit. His "love" for Cressida, based upon a Platonic idea of her fairness and chastity, is a ghostly love without an object; he does not see that it would really be a lustful love based upon his desire for her body.... Nothing is ever equivalent to the energy or eloquence or love lavished upon it. Man's goals are fated to be less than his ideals would have them, and when he realizes this truth he is "enlightened" in the special sense in which tragedy enlightens men□a flash of bitter knowledge that immediately precedes death.

Jules is truly committed to a sensualized Pla-tonism with a woman he, in fact, never really sees. Thus, with Nadine, he cannot distinguish between the body and the spirit; but therein lies the redemptive nature of his love for her for, if he could so distinguish, there could be nothing of the spirit in his love of her. Certainly Nadine Greene is not "equivalent to the energy or eloquence or love lavished upon" her. Still, only men of spiritual greatness ever possess such "energy or eloquence or love." Jules, however, does not attain tragic stature because he draws back from the enlightenment Oates describes.

Even after a disastrous trip to Texas in which Nadine debases him in virtually every way possible, Jules clings to his Platonic conception of her. Some years later, she has to shoot him before "the Spirit of the Lord" departs irrevocably from his soul. But even then, there is no tragic enlightenment; there are simply two more disturbing embodiments of the young man who was once Jules Wendall. Initially he exists in a zombie-like state in the ghetto, cruelly exploiting a young woman and mocking the revolutionaries who wish to recruit him. When the riot does break out, he is rather

accidentally caught up in it, but still kills a policeman. The killing of the policeman produces the final Jules:

Having done this he had done everything. It was over. His blood ran wild, he was not to blame for anything, why should he stop?

The final Jules is a calculating nihilist who allows himself to be recruited by the federal government for a ridiculous social program in California. The full extent of his nihilism can only be seen in a farewell speech to Maureen:

Sweetheart, I understand. I love you too. I'll always think of you, and maybe when I've done better, gotten on my feet, when I come back here and get married□I want to marry her anyway, that woman, the one who tried to kill me, I still love her and I'll make some money and come back and marry her, wait and see□when I come back, a little better off, we can see each other. All right? I love you for being such a sweet sister and suffering so much and getting out of it, using your head, but don't forget that this place here can burn down too. Men can come back in your life, Maureen, they can beat you up again and force your knees apart, why not? There's so much of it in the world, so much semen, so many men! Can't it happen? Won't it happen? Wouldn't you really want it to happen?

After this speech, Jules departs with an "ironic, affectionate bow."

The killing of the policeman, an act Jules commits almost unconsciously, is not the crucial sign of his shift into nihilism. Instead, the ironic taunting of Maureen, along with his open determination to use the governmental project for his own advancement, signifies the new and final Jules. When Maureen asks how he can honestly align himself with the government if he is, as everyone believes, a Communist, he replies: "A Communist! So what? I don't know what a Communist is.... I'm not anything. I'm just trying to get along." One feels that he will get along very well in a competitive environment. Perhaps he will even make enough money in California to win Nadine Greene someday. If he does, however, it will be a victory of vengeance and quite conscious lust, having very little to do with love. Anything is truly possible for Jules now; the nihilistic rogue has replaced the idealistic rebel.

Ironically, Loretta's two oldest children do escape the socioeconomic trap into which they were born, but only through such violations of the public morality she has herself adopted that she cannot cherish their triumphs. She even has to disown Jules: he is, after all, a murderer. For quite different reasons, the reader must view the final Jules with pain also. Oates has something to say about the ending of Melville's *Confidence Man* which is extremely relevant to Jules: "the final movement is a movement into darkness: it is not the triumph of evil over good but rather the negation of struggle, the disintegration into an underlying nihilism that has resulted, within the novel, from the long series of negations that constitute the confidence-man's experience." Jules has ceased his spiritual struggle and has finally been driven into a dark corner by the naturalistic forces he encountered all his life. Yet his struggle, however doomed, is at least equally as important as his final defeat. His effort to save his soul through an

intensely romantic love provides, not just Jules, but the entire novel with a transcendence it would otherwise lack. This novel constitutes Oates's re-creation and sanctification of a new world by her "honoring [of] the complexities" of the lives of them□the people of the ghetto who live and die outside the field of vision of most of her readers. It is a redemptive ritual of esthetic form. The tension between naturalistic documentation of struggle and pain and romantic glorification of the human soul is crucial to *them,* as well as to her other fiction.

Source: James R. Giles, "Suffering, Transcendence, and Artistic 'Form': Joyce Carol Oates's *them,"* in *Arizona Quarterly,* Vol. 32, No.3, Autumn, 1976, pp. 213-26.

Adaptations

them was released on audiocassette by Center for Cassette Studies in 1974.

Topics for Further Study

Assemble an audio collage of the music that would have been playing during some part of these characters' lives in the city: the late 1930s, when Loretta is a teenager, or the 1950s, when Maureen is in high school, or the 1960s during the riots. Explain what the songs you have chosen tell you about life as the characters experienced it.

Do some research about how families survived in the city while men were away in the military fighting World War II. Look for any assistance programs that could have helped Loretta and her children survive in Detroit.

Prepare a psychological evaluation of Loretta, based upon her relationships with her father, her brother and her two husbands. Explain how the concept of "codependence" fits her, and in which ways she seems to not fit the codependent pattern.

What were the long-term results of the riots that burned through Detroit and other American cities in 1967 and 1968. What changes have occurred in urban planning? What is the likelihood that such riots could happen again? What is most likely to cause riots in the future?

Compare and Contrast

1969: Urban America is still recovering from the race riots that devastated Baltimore, Boston, Kansas City, Newark, Chicago, Washington D.C., Detroit, and other cities the previous summer, following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Today: Many civil rights organizations continue to try to combat racial inequities in America.

1969: Many American youths of all social classes are united in their opposition to the war in Vietnam, creating a "youth culture" that spreads hippie styles, music, and slogans.

Today: Many American youths identify with styles, music, and slogans that they receive from the media, such as movies, television shows, music videos, and commercials.

1969: The country becomes aware of heroin, as sales of the drug skyrocket among schoolchildren. The government's new Operation Intercept program is so successful that heroin suddenly becomes competitively priced.

Today: After dropping by more than half between 1975 and 1990, heroin use among high school seniors rises consistently throughout the 1990s.

1969: A three-day-long riot at New York City's Stonewall Inn is credited with beginning the modern gay rights movement, as protestors openly stand up against discrimination and harassment from the police.

Today: A few states recognize gay marriages and many more recognize same-sex partnerships□offering many of the same legal rights as to those who are married.

1969: The Woodstock Music and Art Fair, held at Bethel, New York, becomes a legendary event when 300,000 to 500,000 youth arrive from across the country to attend the four-day festival. Because of the huge unexpected attendance, the promoters stop charging admission and make it a free event. The event is marked by rampant drug use and relatively little crime or violence.

Today: Despite several commercial attempts to relive the spirit of Woodstock by booking long festivals with top-name bands, no one has ever been able to reproduce the harmony of the original event.

What Do I Read Next?

Greg Johnson, himself a poet and acclaimed short story writer, has written extensively about Oates. His recent biography of her is called *Invisible Writer,* published by Dutton in 1998. This is an indispensable tool for students of Oates.

Few American novels have been able to capture the harshness of city life like Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie,* about a young girl from a small town who moves to Chicago to make her fame. First published in 1900, the descriptions still provide great impact on the reader.

Oates has written more than one hundred books, including dozens of novels. One good companion piece to *them* is *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang,* about a group of five girls growing up on the city streets in the 1950s. It was published by Dutton in 1993.

The abrupt swings toward violence in Oates's novels have resulted in her being compared to Flannery O'Connor, one of America's great novelists. All of the works that O'Connor publisher in her brief life are worth reading. Readers might be particularly interested in *The Violent Bear It Away,* a 1960 novel about a young man with a gift for prophesy.

In 1989, the University Press of Mississippi published a collection of interviews under the title *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates.*

Oates and novelist John Updike have always shown a mutual admiration for each other's works. Updike often writes about the tragicomic results of life in suburban America, a field that Oates herself often covers, although not in *them.* Among the best known of his works are his books chronicling the continuing story of one character: *Rabbit Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990).

Further Study

Joanne V. Creighton, "The Trilogy of Social Groups: The Quest for Violent Liberation," in *Joyce Carol Oates,* Twayne Publishers, 1979, pp. 48-73.

The analysis *of them* in this book centers on the idea that it is written as a satire of traditional naturalistic fiction.

Mary Kathryn Grant, *The Tragic Visions of Joyce Carol*

Oates, Duke University Press, 1978.

This early study of the author only covers the first novels, including *them,* but it does so in a clear and insightful way.

Greg Johnson, *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates,* University of South Carolina Press, 1987.

This full, rich analysis of Oates's work is slightly dated, but contains an extensive analysis of *them.*

Fredrick R. Karl, "Modes of Survival," in *Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates,* edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1987.

This essay, originally printed in 1883, addresses the naturalistic elements of the novel and explains Loretta, Maureen, and Jules in relation to other characters in recent fiction.

Marilyn Wesley, *Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol*

Oates' Fiction, Greenwood Press, 1993. This book-length comparative analysis looks at Oates's fiction in terms of family relationships: mothers and fathers, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters, and more. Slightly complex reading for high school students.

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Robert M. Adams, "The Best Nightmares Are Retrospective," *The New York Times Book Review,* September 28, 1969, p. 23.

Calvin Bedient, "Brilliant and Dazzling," *Nation,* Volume CCIX, December 1, 1969, pp. 609-11.

Eileen T. Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence,* Indiana University Press, 1987.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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